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University of Alberta

Laughing Hags: The Comic Vision as Feminist

by

Michelle Lynne Jones ©

a thesis

submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring, 1992

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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

The undersigned certify they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled

Laughing Hags: The Comic Vision as Feminist

submitted by Michelle Lynne Jones

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English.

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DEDICATION

To Douglas Kerr

and to Jo-Ann Wallace

ABSTRACT

Feminist comedy allows writers to "shatter the framework of institutions" (Cixous). Such revolutionary comedy mocks primary socialization, or the very roles or models affirmed by classic comedy. It inverts basic beliefs and questions established identities. Feminist comedy, particularly in the post-World War II period, rejects class and gender distinctions.

This thesis examines the novels of Margaret Atwood, John Irving, Barbara Pym and Muriel Spark as texts which mock societal norms through comic inversion and Virginia Woolf's principle of "derision." In Chapter One, I discuss the academy as an institution and as a target of such feminist comedy. The ideology of education, and its impact, is mocked by the four authors in various ways. In Chapter Two, the portrayal of religion, particularly Christianity, in the novels of these authors is discussed; how have the ideals of religion embedded themselves in society, and how can comedy allow an escape from, or transformation of, religious ideology? In Chapter Three, the idea of the coherent self, or autonomous individual, is shown to be under attack by these four authors, who comically and radically portray the individual as an unstable assemblage of identities, and who question the meanings of language itself.

Discursive footnotes are used to provide historical and theoretical background; to cement differences between feminist and classic comedy; to comment upon material in the main text; and to suggest other possible applications of feminist comedy. The thesis itself employs strategies of derision and inversion, reflecting the comic feminist principle of "woman on top."

By examining the authors' mockery of three major ideological structures-- the academy, the church, and the self-- and by myself using a style reflective of such mockery, I attempt to demonstrate the authors' comic concern with the price paid by the individual, and society, in adhering to conservative behavior and roles. Laughter is the best medicine for the ills of society, and is especially effective in breaking the chains of socialization.

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Thanks to The Green Educational Foundation and to Dr. Charleen Kirkpatrick, who provided funding for me to travel to Edmonton from Muskingum College for my oral defense of the thesis.

Many thanks to Jo-Ann Wallace, who made many useful suggestions, both practical and scholarly, who was a source of inspiration, and the best advisor I could ask for. Thanks too to to Lynn Penrod, who first suggested I attempt a "comic, feminist" writing style.

And for Douglas Kerr, whose sense of the comic has informed my own ("I'm American and he's British; what will our children be like? Rude but disgusted at their own behavior?"), and whose Pymian proofreading and computer skills saved my sanity: much love and endless thanks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 1

THE ACADEMY 38

THE CHURCH 125

THE SELF 200

POSTSCRIPT 288

WORKS CITED 316

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

(EW) Atwood, Margaret. *The Edible Woman*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981 [1969].

(LO) ________. *Lady Oracle*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1981 [1976].

(HT) ________. *The Handmaid's Tale*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986 [1985].

(WMM) Irving, John. *The Water-Method Man*. NY: Pocket Books, 1972.

(Garp) ________. *The World According to Garp*. NY: Pocket Books, 1978 [1976].

(HNH) ________. *The Hotel New Hampshire*. London: Corgi Books, 1984 [1981].

(STG) Pym, Barbara. *Some Tame Gazelle*. London: Granada, 1981 [1950].

(ExW) ________. *Excellent Women*. London: Pan Books, 1989 [1952].

(J&P) ________. *Jane and Prudence*. London: Grafton, 1981 [1953].

(AQ) ________. *An Academic Question*. NY: Plume NAL, 1986.

(MM) Spark, Muriel. *Memento Mori*. NY: Avon Books, 1973 [1959].

(JB) ________. *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. NY: Penguin, 1986 [1961].

(GSM) ________. *The Girls of Slender Means*. NY: Penguin, 1985 [1963].

(ROO) Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Granada, 1977 [1929].

(3G) ________. *Three Guineas*. Middlesex: Penguin, 1978 [1938].

[date] = original date of publication

INTRODUCTION

> There must be courage, there must be no awe. There must be criticism, for humor, to my mind, is encapsulated in criticism. There must be a disciplined eye and a wild mind. There must be a magnificent disregard of the reader, for if he [*sic*] cannot follow you, there is nothing you can do about it.
> -Dorothy Parker, intro. to *The Most of S.J. Perelman*, xiii

In this thesis, I want to challenge traditional ideas about comedy, feminism, and equality between the sexes, through examining certain texts and through my own writing. I want to use both style and content of my thesis to speak this challenge.[1] In doing this, I must walk a

---

[1] To explain the first part of this challenge, style, it is necessary to notify readers that what follows is not the usual way of writing a thesis. In direct opposition to the traditional style where the scholarly and objective are central and the personal is edited out or relegated to the margins, here the personal (in terms of a personal response to texts, as well as including myself and events in my life in the thesis) is focused upon. Most of my unconventional strategies will become apparent throughout the thesis; it is in a reluctant bow to traditional thesis format that I name these strategies here: vernacular style, choppiness, topical and local references, direct address to the reader, and jokes in the top layer, and their more respectable counterparts, formal style, scholarly and universal references, smoothness of transition, a more detached and objective style, in the bottom layer. Far from being the product of incipient schizophrenia, this style of writing was a choice, a political decision on my part. I wish that I could claim to be the sole "mother" of this particular way of writing. However, as in much feminist writing, I owe a great deal to other women. I'm especially grateful to Jo-Ann Wallace for her audacious suggestion that I try "free writing," and who encouraged me more than I can say; Lynn Penrod, at my candidacy exam, mentioned that a "comic style" might be the most appropriate one for this thesis.

To take *any* individual's experience as a reference point has unique dangers; it is a tricky proposition because I run the risk of appearing to value my experience over others', to "self-heroize," or to make my experience that of Woman (the Eternal Feminine). In these pages I've tried to articulate interpretations as they are linked to my lifestyle and my politics. By worrying so much about honesty and by trying to explain why I felt so much fear at beginning this project, my attitude could be construed as overly defensive or pugnacious. Do I over-explain my positions and risk alienating readers who see this as a result of paranoia or underestimation of the academy's capacity for flexibility? My decision to speak in the tone that you hear throughout comes from the belief that my experiences are closely tied to my criticism of the tightrope between accessibility and honesty. I will examine some

---

texts, and also from the desire to make this act of communication as clear as possible to a number of readers. I don't intend to pose myself as a hero or a pioneer, but to show that "breaking chains of socialization" for me at least, is very difficult.

> I am forced to be more direct and more intense. I am making more use of symbolism, I observe; and I go in dread of 'sentimentality.' Is the whole theme open to that charge? But I doubt that any theme is in itself good or bad. It gives a chance to one's peculiar qualities-- that's all. (Woolf's *Writer's Diary* 104)

As befits a thesis that advocates derision and inversion, the style reflects the principle of "woman on top." The thesis "body," with its disregard for convention, its wildness, and its comic approach, subscribes to ideas of disorder. Natalie Zemon Davis describes the disorderly woman at length in her valuable article "Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe." Though I will not be able to discuss "writing the body," as a feminist act, in any great detail, it seems to me that feminist writing (and feminist comic writing in particular) engage the body and questions of materiality as a central concern. I will discuss this later as "the ordinary."

> The female sex was thought to be the disorderly one par excellence in early modern Europe. "Une beste imparfaicte," went one adage, "sans foy, sans loy, sans craincte, sans constance" (an imperfect animal, without faith, law, fear, constancy). .... with women the disorderliness was founded in physiology. (Zemon Davis 147)

The "womanly" and disorderly qualities here are crucial for my discussion of feminist comedy. Women are linked with the "lower," the animal; because of their wild nature they are sometimes able to disregard the institutions that bind them. Such female disorderliness is linked to "transgressive" comedy, where the unruly woman can unmask the truth (Zemon Davis 163). Zemon Davis also stresses that "*Play with the various images of woman on top, then, kept open an alternate way of conceiving family structure*" (172, orig. emph.). Rousseau comments on funny women: "A female wit is a scourge to her husband, her children, her servants, to everybody .... she is always trying to make a man of herself .... Outside her home she is very rightly a butt for criticism" (quoted in Russ 31).

In this thesis, I use this technique as an alternate way of conceiving, not only family structure, but the ideological structures of the church, the academy, and the autonomous self. As well, the "woman(ly writing) on top" is used as a way of mocking traditional writing techniques. The juxtaposition of the two styles-- "one takes the trial tone-- rational, legalistic, logical. The other voice discourses loosely, inventive" (Blau DuPlessis 277)-- is done by Woolf in *Three Guineas* (referred to throughout as *3G*).

quietly revolutionary comic texts and show what makes them revolutionary, and discuss how we can put their manifestos, hopes, and ambitions into practice.

Why do I think that this is so important that I'm (not with courage or with "magnificent disregard," but with trepidation and timidity) trying to tackle questions about authority (yours, mine, the academy's, the authors') simultaneously with literary questions about the texts themselves? This seemingly reckless action can jeopardize my own "respectability" as a scholar, critic, poet, and feminist.[2] I run the

---

I also attempt to explore links between comic and feminist writing styles, and discuss how one can be useful to the other. Folk comedy, as Bakhtin notes, is associated with the vernacular, the regional and local, and the marginal. So is much feminist writing. Joanna Russ observes

> *Women always write in the vernacular.*
> Not strictly true, and yet it explains a lot. It certainly explains letters and diaries. And Nin's choice of the diary as the quintessentially feminine form. (128)

The "vernacular" top layer of the thesis is written in a personal, diary-like and letter-like style (using "I," addressing the reader directly, including references to "private" lives, and other no-nos of academic writing) while the "formal" bottom layer should behave more like the usual scholarly paper.

2. Experimental critical writing, as Marianna Torgovnick, a full professor at Duke, labels it, incites what may seem to many unreasonable and unreasoning terror. Of her first presentation (at the 1988 MLA) of a paper not written for a committee, she says

> ... I was afraid to give this paper[;] I had announced it in the program by the deliberately neutral title "Looking at Anthropologists" so that I could change my mind up to the last minute and substitute something else instead. I was afraid because "Malinowski's Body" does not resemble the usual MLA paper in style and content. (25)

Olivia Frey, in "Beyond Literary Darwinism," concurs:

> Blindly adopting critical conventions, or any methodology, is commonplace not only in literary studies but in other disciplines .... I have no quarrel with those who knowingly adopt traditional structures, although those are the structures I infrequently

risk of not being taken seriously (a charge echoed, by the way, in most comic texts-- it's "only" a joke; one need not take it to heart). To attack, subvert and deride the academy-- the very people I should be trying to please-- is on one level very foolish. I put under fire the prize, the plum, the tenure-track position, respectability. (Or, as they used to threaten us in grade school, "This goes on your PERMANENT record.") This is something I'm anxious to confront in later chapters. But the question remains: why not play it safe?

Comedy is a technique or stance that seems to hold out hope-- hope for tearing down and for reconstruction. Cixous says that laughter can shatter institutions and blow up the law (292). In the feminist "thesis" (for want of a better word) that follows, I want to test a hypothesis in the traditional academic sense-- that our idea of laughter is

---

> choose and infrequently read with pleasure. What distresses me the most, however, is knowing that there are women who know what they are doing, hate it, but are afraid to do something different. These women fear that their degrees will be denied, their dissertations blocked. They fear that their articles and conference proposals will be rejected. They fear that they won't be hired, tenured, promoted. They fear for their careers and their livelihoods. (519-20)

Chapter 1, "The Academy," goes more fully into questions of departures from traditional style, especially as they relate to Atwood, Irving, Pym and Spark. However, I think it is important to appreciate the incongruity of writing about hilariously funny, revolutionary and feminist works in a solemn, objective and conservative tone. Like Torgovnick, who used experimental critical writing about an "untraditional, unconventional topic," I found a "conventional and scholarly" (26) approach completely inappropriate. I also had similar troubles finding a style that fit the content.

In splitting the thesis between comic feminist style and formal style, I hope that I have managed to include sufficient information and sufficient passion about the topic-- as, perhaps, a good joke can also be instructive. Bakhtin lists the salutary effects of laughter; one of its most powerful attributes is its "victory over fear" (90). He describes carnivalesque images as "the thousand-year-old language of fearlessness, a language with no reservations and omissions" (269). Laughter can defeat terror.

inadequate; that we don't truly understand the power of comedy; that comedy is the most forceful way to argue the feminist cause. By using a few selected texts as examples, I want to discuss all these things. But, more frighteningly, I'd like to use my own writing to upend, question, satirize and lampoon the traditional and conventional way of proving a hypothesis.[3] As Cixous says, a truly feminine text cannot fail to be subversive; Brossard declares that anger, revolt, and desire are tools that can be used to escape and alter traditional and constricting forms (lecture, Univ. of Alberta, Nov. 25, 1988). These tools, I want to suggest, have a great deal in common with comedy: all transgress, all subvert traditional language and all move away from the binary.

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[3] Many feminist academics take issue with the usual adversarial ways of "proving" a hypothesis, for several reasons: "the profession by and large values conventions of literary critical discourse that may not fit the values, the perceptual framework, and the ways of writing of many women in English departments across the country" (Frey 507-8). Traditional discourse demands smoothing out contradictions and presenting a coherent, finished and persuasive argument to the reader, preferably relying heavily on praising, building on, or attacking the work of other scholars to get a point across (i.e. Professor X has completely distorted Novel Y, or Writer B deserves more recognition). With remarkable candor, Torgovnick remarks

> ... the styles we were taught can't work now in the same way as they worked fifty or even fifteen years ago. No one who gets around to writing a book, or even an essay, ever reads everything that has been written about its subject. Yet we cling to the fiction of completeness and coverage that the academic style preserves. (27)

Frey discusses the scholarly discrediting, attacks and refutations demanded by academic journals and conferences as incompatible with feminist values. She examines a critique of Gabler's Ulysses: The Corrected Text, an article that suggests Gabler is careless, incompetent, and has questionable motives. Frey writes that she cares about having the best possible texts with which to work, but

> ... I also care about Gabler, not that I know him, but I know that as a person he must suffer from the accusation. When I first read the report on the scandal ... what ran through my mind were thoughts like, Professor Gabler has worked a long time on this project. How is he reacting? What will happen to him now? Is his career destroyed? (516)

These questions are not traditionally scholarly or respectable, yet feminist writers, myself included, are trying to make them so. To confess that one is not objective, that there is anything besides making a good argument on one's mind, is too often the cause of the rejection described by Frey, who nonetheless writes that "I am not easily able to distance the strategies of literary criticism from the personal. I cannot objectify other writings or issues as I am working on a piece.

Brossard also observes that "a feminist consciousness can only lead to creation," and that this consciousness requires us to keep moving toward the terrifying and exhilarating unknown (hence my various labels of fear, timidity). A creation is what I want this study or appreciation to lead to: I'd like the writing to resemble what Brossard calls "sliding"-- where ideas are displaced, questions are raised, concentration is demanded, but a place where, with intensity and close attention, transformation is possible.

For me, the whole endeavor is richly peopled" (516).

Frey refuses the demands to leave aside or ignore the personal. She describes

> what matters to women in most circumstances, not only when we are making moral decisions but in our everyday endeavors-- thinking, learning, studying, making mundane decisions like what color to paint the house or what to cook for dinner; or making more significant decisions, like whether to have this baby or not, or whether to go to this conference or not (I will miss my son's play if I go). (509-10)

In the same way, Torgovnick believes that "writerly writing" should allow the reader to know some things about the writer: a "fundamental condition ... of any real act of communication" (27). So in this thesis the mundane appears side by side with the analytical; "personal questions" rub elbows with scholarly inquiries. This explains, at least partially, my vision of Spark, Pym, Irving and Atwood sitting down to dinner or arguing religion and politics. It also explains some of my wilder flights of fancy about refrigerators, relatives, childhood games and bank accounts. So instead of proving a theory in the usual way-- that is, that feminist comedy in Pym et al. is a good way of promoting the feminist cause-- I want to open up the question for discussion and for laughter.

It is frightening and invigorating to tell the truth about institutions that have supported me (not that well), educated me (rather one-sidedly), and allowed me (sort of) to do what I'm doing now. But to tell the truth, to deride, to pelt the mulberry tree with laughter, to free myself from unreal loyalties, while writing a thesis in the hope that I will be given "badges, orders, [and] degrees" seems contradictory. It is. But, as even Woolf might agree, it is better to write and risk "ridicule, obscurity and censure" under the guise and motivation of "advertising merit" (93) than never to write at all. As Joanna Russ put it so well in How to Suppress Women's Writing, it is better to open the question-- even partially and gropingly-- than to hang back in fear that what I produce cannot be perfect (133). Some compromise is going to be necessary in the writing; I must be honest about this at the outset. If not for compromise, my writing would be churning, spilling off the page, and unconfined between neat margins and covers (or even in "coherent" words). And even Woolf, Russ, and Blau DuPlessis, in their lovely crazyquilts of writing, use footnotes and page numbers.

What follows will be a commentary, poem, analysis, or any other kind label you may wish to apply, on "poverty, chastity, derision and freedom from unreal loyalties" (Woolf 90), a lament on the difficulty of achieving these qualities in a world that celebrates their polar opposites: wealth, "intellectual harlotry," surrender, and all manner of personal and national pride. It is, in a way, a manifesto, though it does not deserve any such grand name, because I try to show where I stand on the issues that the "thesis" will raise. Although it may read as artless or stream-of-consciousness, in fact it took far more mindbending and agonizing self-examination to write than a traditional essay of the type most of us learned by rote. It is inspired by, and shamelessly indebted to, sources as diverse as Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Kurt Vonnegut, Virginia Woolf, John Irving, *Time*, my first-year English students, Susan Gubar, *The Edmonton Journal*, television, angst-ridden graduate student dinner parties, Kingsley Amis, *Better Homes and Gardens*, Nicole Brossard, various departmental seminars, and snippets of conversation overheard at the Superstore, in washrooms, and in classes.[4] I would like this to be a "form of verbal quilt" (Blau

---

[4] As I mentioned earlier, a great many of my (non-primary text) references will not be from legitimate scholarly sources, but are topical and local. Many are from local newspaper, television, mass market magazines and "popular culture" sources; still others are anecdotal. As Bakhtin points out, Rabelaisian comedy is linked to similar "popular" and accessible sources, and is therefore more "democratic" (2). Bakhtin lists the changes in perception demanded by such comedy: that it reconstruct artistic and ideological perceptions; that it necessitate a renunciation of deep-seated literary taste, a revision of concepts, and an understanding of folk humor in general (3). The choice of "folk" style and sources is directly related to my deliberate choice of writing style: it is impossible to write in a truly feminist and/or comic style without using Bakhtin's "unofficial" language; I will cement this strategy by deliberately using local, domestic, personal and topical references in the top layer.

I believe there is little precedent for using such a strategy in academic writing. In comedy, however, "familiar speech" and colloquialisms are centered in the marketplace (Bakhtin 153)-- an intensely local and unique place. In marketplace comedy, women represented an "undoing of pretentiousness" and acted as figures of ambivalence (240). In one way, using local and topical sources reaffirms the feminist idea of the personal as political (or Woolf's link of the private and public houses, or Eric Wolf's delineation of "male-female as an expression of the relationships public-domestic and instrumental-expressive" [Zemon Davis fn. 6]), since reporting a *local* event stresses its connection to me and to the world outside the thesis. To put the personal (i.e. "close to me" geographically and temporally) at the center is a comic technique.

> A list of the characteristics of postmodernism would be a list of the traits of women's writing: inwardness, illumination in the here and now (Levertov); use of the continuous present (Stein); the foregrounding of consciousness (Woolf); the muted, multiple or absent *telos*; a fascination with process; a horizontal world;

DuPlessis 264), a montage, or something like the collages made in grade school: lively, lots of color, everything put together in an order that at first appears unorganized or ugly, but afterwards makes sense--something that occupies the mind long after the eye has seen it.

Waiting for the Revolution: of money, the academy, and "bad writing"

Yesterday I saw a very traditional, very rigorous, very footnoted academic talk on women within the capitalist structure. Someone asked whether it was possible for women and men to achieve economic equality within the present system. The lecturer, after a long pause, replied, "Only after the revolution."

> a decentered universe where "man" (indeed) is no longer privileged. (Blau DuPlessis 271)

By putting domestic concerns (laundry, pregnancy, bill-paying) on "top," I invert usual academic procedure. The "private" or "lower" world of women and children (expressed in the vernacular) is set against the world of men and institutions (expressed in the formal).

To explain this technique further: I wrote all three main chapters in "woman on top" style in the first draft. All three focused on readings of the texts, jokes and other comic or awful incidents that intervened as I wrote. This was a "loose, chatty" and conversational way of writing-- difficult, but enjoyable because of its very "unofficialness." After completing the top layers, which are specific, local, and personal, I then went through the layers while wearing my academic robes (borrowed or stolen as they were). When a critical or theoretical term ("feminist comedy," "institution," "traditional comedy") was used in the top layer, I used the bottom layer to define, explain, or clarify the term so that the reader could read on with a full understanding of what was meant by it, or how I wanted it to be applied. The bottom layer is also used to suggest more general applications of the theory explained, or its appearances in other texts of similar comic feminists, or to discuss possible alliances between genres (tragedy and comedy, feminist comedy and "popular" language, canonized literature and traditional comedy as subversive.) This method mocks, by upholding to an extreme degree, the academic tradition of discursive footnotes.

> **Through it, the entire world is turned into something alien, something terrifying and unjustified. The ground slips from under our feet, and we are dizzy because we find nothing stable around us.** (35)

Bakhtin's statement about Rabelaisian comedy applies equally well to anarchic feminist comedy: it is linked to "the revolution" by its energy, its dissatisfaction with the way things are, and its determination to make a new world. Here I'd like to talk about feminists within the academy, keeping in mind Woolf's advice on how we can "join the professions and yet be uncontaminated by them" (96), and Blau DuPlessis' comment on graduate school: we were "entirely obligated to take and pass their test" (259). Now that there are a few token women, and even a few feminists within the academy, have things changed? Are we becoming "them"-- the test-givers? We academics sneer at soulless bureaucrats, capitalist exploiters, and Yuppies who strive for the BMW, the cellular phone and all the materialistic trappings, berating them for immoral values and lack of imagination. But can we say we have done much better? Feminists (myself included) try to work within the system, and we become inhumane in the process. Some of these "firm-chinned professionals" (Blau DuPlessis 267) are as authoritarian and hierarchical as those they say they despise, as obsessed with proper rank and accomplishments, with being accepted in the real world, and with being "taken seriously." If we can have careers at all, it doesn't matter on whose terms we have them. ("She has her babies bravely between semesters. She fears being ghettoized. Being patronized. But it happened anyway. Any way. And she did not 'control' it." [Blau DuPlessis 267])

(The washing machine is overbalancing. Must be the fan belt.)

What I want to question (what I am questioning) is not the "intellectual dowdiness" Blau DuPlessis sees in the present system, but the posing and pretending that answers are easy; that working within the system is completely satisfactory (is this called "making a virtue of necessity"?). All the advice and pretensions are thinly disguised worry about competition for jobs: who is THE trendy writer "to work on" (my teeth-grinding weariness with the question, "who are you working with?" "Who are you working on?" "Oh, she's been DONE."). Now it's Afro-American, then it was Joyce, a few years ago someone else, but they all disappear, trivialized and specialized, into the big soup of academia (dear me, what a housewifely image).

Blau DuPlessis' great influence was Lessing and The Golden Notebook; Rich's was Jane Eyre; Russ', the Brontës. This leads to a confession: frankly, with me it was The Women's Room. Which is not trendy. Which is not academic. Which is not intellectual. Which made me see: my mother. My four sisters. My best friend. Myself. What I had to do. And why. I'm sorry, Academia, I have to admit that it was not J.S. Mill or Mary Shelley or even Adrienne Rich. It was bitter, hating and hated Marilyn French with her shit and string beans, who is sneered at publicly and privately for her "bad" writing. And she is not intellectual enough, of course (all nod sagely)-- this is not good writing, it does not count, it's about spoiled white suburban women (never mind my mother, my sisters, myself) and kitchen/ baby/ husband/ adultery angst. It does not matter (never mind my best friend, my little sister, my husband all read it; we argued and screamed about it). It's too open, it's not symbolic, it's too clumsy-- look at those oh-so-meaningful names; my God, a mere high school grad could pick those out!

So Val is Valiant, Bliss is not blissful, Iso is isolated and Mira is a mirror. It's too easy, it needs to be harder, it's bad writing and she shall not be canonized because anyone can understand it and besides she's embarrassed us terribly.

> **Recently I received a rejection slip from a well-meaning editor who, while admitting the 'necessary' nature of my poems, took issue with the fact that my poems 'said it all.' 'Try more denotation, synedoche, metonymy, suggestion,' he said. Yet I and many feminist poets do not want to treat poetry as a metalanguage that needs to be decoded.** (Russ quoting S. Juhasz, 117)

I see this "disowning" of writers like French, Kate Millett, Rita Mae Brown, and others-- their dismissal as "bad"-- as yet another shared trait between feminism and comedy. Implicit in feminism and in revolutionary comedy is the necessity of telling the truth about women's lives. Both comedy and feminism, as cold, elegant aesthetic truths, can be analyzed, parsed, discussed, and pinned down, away from the warm beating heart of experience. But if this experience be told in unacceptable form, it is rapidly dismissed as inconsequential, confessional, self-indulgent, silly or trashy. Insufficient obscurity by the author signals the deadly of deadlies, mass appeal, or worse, mass understanding. Analysis and naming are exalted above the body and the spirit-- another linkage between feminism and comedy that I want to explore later on.[5] Julia Penelope notes the annoyance of critics when

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[5] Bakhtin explores how, before the sixteenth century, the serious and the comic co-existed and were regarded as equally official and sacred. The body was viewed as deeply and fundamentally positive-- unsevered from other parts of life, the body represents all the people (19). Later he contrasts the Renaissance idea of laughter (like the body) as positive and creative with its later use as negative and limiting (71). This parallels contemporary negative views of the body (particularly what Bakhtin calls the "lower bodily aspect") as degraded, lowered-- possibly because of its accessibility. That is, familiar speech and common language (directed at Woolf's "common reader") is not normally

"works ... make the function of the critic obsolete. The ... work ... [is] immediately available to the reader, and there is no need for the ... intervention of the critic as guide or explicator" (quoted in Russ 117). And if a writer violates good taste along with violating artistic convention, she invites vicious reviews:

> **After all, working class people don't know a damn about "good taste" and the unity of tone and style (nobody ever taught them, poor sods) .... [middle class and working class women cannot] use established forms to express what the forms were never intended to express (and may very well operate to conceal).** (Russ 125)

In the same way, I realize and accept responsibility for violating academic convention in this thesis-- not because nobody ever taught me, poor sod, but because the traditional form was not intended to express my ideas, and all the tugging, pulling, and twisting in the world has not made it fit my feminist shape. And so far, the traditional form has worked beautifully in concealing the truth about women's lives. My shock of recognition in reading French arose from a reading past much like Lee Edwards': no "women whose acquaintance I had made in fiction had much to do with the life I led or wanted to lead ..." (quoted in Russ, 14). Or Roseanne Barr describing her conversion to feminism:

> It was right after I was in the nuthouse and I was walking down the street, and God, it must have been like 1969, and I saw a newsletter on the ground ... and it was about women's liberation. I was seventeen years old. I went: "My God, this is what it is! This is why everyone thinks you're nuts your whole life! Because you're an intelligent woman and you're in this town". (Dworkin 108)

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used in academic and critical writing. Unofficial speech-- "abuses, curses, profanities, improprieties" (185)-- refuses conventional language and etiquette. Most of this anti-academic speech centers on the body; scatological images bring one "down to earth" and make the subject material. This kind of "dirty" (literally) language of birth, copulation, defecation and death is set, in carnivalesque images, against the "clean" language of heaven, expressed in metaphors of the face and head. Blau DuPlessis' expression of a feminist text as "the first Tampax in world literature" fits in well here.

In writing this, I feel like Amis' Lucky Jim delivering his academic address in all different accents and voices in an attempt to find the right one. My first attempt at a thesis chapter stuck to traditional, structured, ABC ranked analysis, with flashes of anarchical humor and sometimes genuine passion (which I sternly kept a lid on; I didn't want to be construed as ranting). I tried so hard to write the thing reasonably well and just get it done, accomplished, paperclipped.

(Besides, I should be marking essays right now.)

Teaching, money, time, Alberta winter all press on me to write, and expediency demands that I write the way that's easiest, fastest, and demands the least heartache-- the path of least resistance. But I didn't feel entirely honest donning the mask of detached scientific observer with all the properly conditioned responses. So now I'm struggling to find the right voice, or at least a more comfortable one than the safe, slightly snarky but properly respectful, one of my first attempt. After years of obeying (and teaching) the rules of "right" writing, I'm suddenly trying to disregard them - or discard them for something more honest.

And now: the phone bill. Damn. Yes, write the thing, do as they say, graduate, get out, move somewhere that heating bills aren't $70 a month, electricity isn't $30 and it costs less than $15 a pop to wish my mother a happy birthday. Pounds and pence and pudding for dinner, indeed. It would be lovely to be a smooth-browed academic type with paid utilities, leather elbow patches, and the requisite cloud of pipe smoke.

How did we spend sixteen bucks on water?

News item: "I always wanted to be in a beauty pageant. Now I know what it's really like," Fong said .... She will take home $15,000 in prizes, including a trip to London. (Edmonton Journal, July 22, 1989)

Average salary for graduate assistant, University of Alberta: $3294.53 [four months]. (Graduate Students' Association)

Virginia Woolf: I "see no reason why one should not write as one speaks, familiarly, colloquially" (quoted in Blau DuPlessis, 262). Were you worried about money, Virginia? Were you thinking tenure-track? Did publish or perish mean anything to you? I'm sorry. I'm sure it did. And I'm sure the weighty gray ghost of Academia sat just as heavily on your writing wrist as he does on mine. More so, probably. When do I tell the truth when I write? Certainly not in cheerful, funny, half-lying letters home; certainly not in dissertation chapters.

Fear overrides this: the overpowering push of tradition and fear that I will not be respected if I don't meet men on their own academic ground, using rigorous, traditional, structured, conservative accepting and acceptable style.[6] Even when I'm writing a polemic and strongly anti-hierarchical thesis, I feel as if I must argue in an assumed voice-- using the clumsy tongue of someone else (or, as Elizabeth Pochoda calls it, wearing "borrowed robes" [Russ 12]). After ten years of doing that, it's nearly second nature, nearly my own tongue.[7] I fell back on tradition, early on in writing this, because other options are mysterious and unexplored-- just as most people fall into conventional patterns of life because alternatives are unknown and therefore frightening. We're kept in line by the fear that "they" incite in you that you will not live up to their standards (an acceptable thesis covering mainstream authors, leading of course to a mainstream and acceptable job, money, life-- following the ladder upward, never spiralling, never oscillating, just climbing linearly). But I'll try to write in a language that is my own, one that is

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[6] It's entirely possible that the reader I've posited-- untroubled academic type ("potent, phallic and male-- God in relation to his world," as Mary Daly says) no longer exists in quite the same numbers, or in quite the same way. Part of my construction of such antagonism probably comes about because I've been educated and employed largely by conservative institutions-- a large midwestern U.S. public university during the Reagan years, two small church-related colleges. Hardly hotbeds of sympathetic readers, let alone feminists; as I mention in Chapter One, I didn't have a female literature teacher until starting the doctoral program. But readers of this thesis could be-- I hope will be-- empathetic to some of the problems expressed herein: finding a comfortable style, trying to "remain humane" while in the academy, the difficulty and necessity of maintaining a sense of humor, or a comic vision. It was, after all, two sympathetic readers who encouraged me to attempt this experiment, and certainly other teachers and colleagues (both male and female) gave me pep talks, suggestions, lent me books and helped in other ways. Writing a thesis (or anti-thesis) is such a solitary business that it can make the writer feel defensive, ridiculed, under the rule of Academia's gray ghost. It's my hope that this ghost is being laughed out of existence by those feminists with a comic

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vision. Maybe my readers will not be "those rare types which would soon be obsolete if left to fight for existence on the pavement of the Strand" (Woolf ROO 10), but Woolf's Common Reader, one who reads for pleasure. A reader I could invite to the dinner party of the thesis - one who would perhaps bring some wine and offer to help with the dishes.

7. Jane Tompkins calls the constraints of literary criticism a "straitjacket," saying that she feels "uncomfortable in the postures academic prose forced me to assume; it is like wearing men's jeans" (Frey 507). It is surprising how often feminist writers liken conventional discourse to uncomfortable clothing-- Russ writes that "Women's clothes, by the way, still do not have functional pockets, a fact which may be reflected in women's writing" (47). Woolf writes of the "immense elaboration" of academic dress, and of how until a few years ago women were denied access to the "advertisement function" (3G 20) of such dress. To me this is a comment on women's early exclusion from such language, and later the demands that they ally themselves with it. Brian Doyle, in English and Englishness, notes the changing face of literary criticism in his chapter on "English as a masculine profession." Literature's prewar role, he states, was that of propagating taste and decency; the "Professional Gentleman" was a paragon of "unemotional, rational, asexual maleness" (70). He connects this to the "scientific basis to literary dissection (an almost mathematical rigidity)" (84), brought about partly to counter accusations that English was "effeminate" (91).

comfortable, one that tells the truth as much as possible.

> **"So we go back to her place and she says, 'Bub, make me feel like a woman.' So I cut her wages by forty percent."**

Everything in this "manifesto" so far relates to money in one way or another. Again, I keep thinking about the university administration's refusal - most gallingly, among female professors and administrators-- to admit how teaching assistants and sessional lecturers (most of whom are women) are abused. The mask of collegiality, jocularity, paternalism covers up their expediency and a real callousness. They're enmeshed in tradition and can't or won't believe that other women teachers are bearing an unreasonable burden-- even as they mouth "traditional feminist" beliefs in equality, collegiality, even the revolution.

> **Q: What's the difference between worry and panic?**
> **A: Twenty-eight days.**

It's necessary to be a sessional-- one must pay the bills (or, as a Philosophy sessional would have it, "sell one's capacities to others in order to survive.") Yet I have no job security, terrible pay, and get little respect for the work I do, which makes the writing of this all the more scary. In my head at the moment is a dialogue-- a conversation between the traditional elements who tell me to shut up, write the thing and get out and the rock-bottom, stubborn voice (indebted to my Baptist upbringing, no doubt) that tells me to stick with the truth, no matter what the consequences of telling it may be. I wish I had the courage to indicate everything that's on my mind as I read the texts-- health insurance, taxes, mostly money, whether I'm pregnant this month, whose turn it is to cook dinner-- and how that affects my own reading and writing, because it is a lie to pretend that these things either don't exist or that I can always dutifully rise above them. (Something along the lines of Blau DuPlessis' "Crash. MOM! WHAT! 'You never buy what I like! Only what YOU like!'" in the middle of her essay, but with me it would be the phone ringing with inquiries about next July's classroom number, the arrival of bills and job rejections, the washer overbalancing, and intrusive thoughts on how the hell I teach Shakespeare to first-years.)

And somehow, too, this links up with a topic I've heard more and more of lately: in any given group of graduate students, one of us will start to talk about starting our own university, with round tables, lots of windows, and no structure-- very loosely modelled on a writing workshop and its free, unthreatening exchange of ideas. No seminar sharks allowed. Much like Woolf's Society of Outsiders. It's a lot like play as we sit around and talk about where it would be (Banff or Maine), and who the administrators would be (we'd steal departmental secretaries, who run everything anyway).

-- and is any form of writing a nonhierarchic stance of intimate conversation? Where do you find this writing "that doesn't pretend to be ultimate, academic"? How do you not lie-- unlearning to not speak, or if you can't say anything nice .... But ALL conversation, no matter how mutual, involves some kind of hierarchy, rules, order-- how else is communication possible? What gets heard if everyone talks at once?

> Billy couldn't read Tralfamadorian, of course, but he could at least see how the books were laid out-- in brief clumps of symbols separated by stars. Billy commented that the clumps might be telegrams.
>
> "Exactly," said the voice.
>
> "They are telegrams?"

> "There are no telegrams on Tralfamadore. But you're right: each clump of symbols is a brief, urgent message-- describing a situation, a scene. We Tralfamadorians read them all at once, not one after the other. There isn't any particular relationship between all the messages, except that the author has chosen them carefully, so that, when seen all at once, they produce an image of life that is beautiful and surprising and deep. There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no moral, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time." (Vonnegut 62-3)

So that's what happens when everyone talks at once.

This mode of writing is scary for a million reasons, all of them buried deep and hard to put into words. What worries me is this: am I emulating Woolf, Blau DuPlessis, Russ, and/or Rich because they're brilliant (I'm coming to see that, but it still gives me a headache) and they say well so many things I'd like to say-- and because it is so scary to try other ways of writing, or to make up my own entirely? Or is this the rock-bottom of honesty after all?

I keep thinking of the Journal's fashion page yesterday, which heralded "fashion innovations for men." Accompanying photo: six men, all white, young, clean-shaven, firm-jawed; all wearing white shirt, sober tie, black, gray, or brown suit jacket and trousers, black shoes, and serious Marlborough-man expressions. So, question: when we think we're being innovative, how innovative are we being (or how innovative are we allowed to be)?[8] If I wrote the way I truly feel I'd be falling

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[8] A later note: earlier I labelled my style of writing as possibly "stream-of-consciousness." Perhaps that is not the right word here, but like Woolf, I "want to watch and see how the idea at first occurs. I want to trace my own process" (Writer's Diary 104), a difficult thing to pinpoint. To "show my stitches," to exploit the seams of this thesis is not easy, especially when time makes me somewhat idealize the writing of this. It has been "interesting," and exhilarating, but also painful (like childbirth will be next month?).

I wanted badly to do something different in writing this thesis. I wrote one chapter, on dress and body image, in a style completely in off the page, white ink or no, Dr. Cixous.

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keeping with what I'd been taught: detached, dry, objective. Not a single joke. I was proud of myself; I was also bored to tears. My advisor asked me to read "Etruscans" and try what she called an "off the wall" suggestion - a free-writing response. This I did; much of this response, and spinoffs from it, is contained in this Introduction.

One technique I wanted to borrow or steal came from Alice Jardine: to use a cast of characters, as she did in a lecture at the University of Alberta. One of these characters was an earnest, eager-to-please woman graduate student questioning a Great Man, whom I characterized as the "old gray ghost of academia." I wanted to make the thesis a dialogue between these characters, interspersed with traditional-style footnotes (like Woolf in *3G*) as deflationary comments. Another thing I wanted to do was to find some scholarly advice on thesis writing and mock it, as Irving does in *The Water-Method Man*; yet another idea was to structure the thesis in a very lurid, purple-prose way (*Confessions of a Graduate Student: The Shocking Truth! Now It Can Be Told*). What these approaches all have in common is a kind of doubleness or multiplicity of voices; the (female, tentative, scared) graduate student-- unsure of anything but the desire to question-- as opposed to the other voice: the (male, certain, firm) professor-- unsure of anything but the desire to answer, to comment, to fill in the gaps. The conversation between the two, I thought, was not only illuminating; it was *comic*. One inflates; the other deflates.

I wanted to posit the top half as my own voice: distressed, sarcastic, possibly naive but ultimately hopeful against the other voice I'd so often assumed in academic writing, the voice of the footnotes. (How successful I was in this self-portrayal I'm not sure-- although a committee member who'd never seen me before approached me in a crowded room. How did she know who I was? "I read your thesis," she said.)

Some self-censoring is inevitable, especially in a thesis. My rationale for what incidents or snippets of thought or jokes to include came from the principle of collage: I wanted to suggest enough bits and pieces of events and thought to give some kind of representation of what it means to insert myself into the text. Not so much a documentary film as a series of snapshots-- freeze-frames to show what that moment in time was like and how it intersected with the texts. It's a way of writing, however, that demands also some exclusion, troubling though that is.

> I might in the course of time learn what it is that one can make of this loose, drifting material of life; finding another use for it than the use I put it to, so much more consciously and scrupulously, in fiction .... The main requisite, I think on re-reading my old volumes, is not to play the part of censor, but to write as the mood comes or of anything whatever; since I was curious to find how I went for things put in haphazard, and found the significance to life where I never saw it at the time. (Woolf's *Writer's Diary* 23)

I did not want to leave anything out, but had to; so I tried to leave enough in to suggest a process.

What Woolf does in Three Guineas: opposing the "rational, legalistic, logical" voice to loose "inventive, chatty, exploring every nook and cranny" (Blau DuPlessis 264)-- can I do this? How? And is it horribly presumptuous even to attempt to be like Woolf, someone I revere? Well, people try to emulate God and no one thinks it's presumptuous. (As I was writing this, I was stunned to run across almost my exact words in Spender's Man Made Language: "Who am I to be so presumptuous? What possible evidence do I have that this is something I can expect to do?" [230])

Can a dissertation be an art form? -- form being the word I'm having trouble with here; or the collage[9] I talked about earlier? Blau DuPlessis writes of "antithesis to dominant values" (265)-- this is what my comedians are trying to do, what I'm trying to do-- maybe this thing should be called an anti-thesis, an anti-dissertation. I know what I want it to be, but it's not a dissertation (or, as my three-year-old brother once said, "I'm pasting something, but it's not your cat.")

It is a thrilling, and terrifying, ambition to "write a great, encyclopedic, holistic work" (Blau DuPlessis 265), the kind it hurts to leave anything out of. And the form: will this be a desk, a tote bag, a

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> The hope of accuracy we bring to such tasks is crazy, heart-breaking.
>
> And no list could hold what I wanted, for what I wanted was every last thing, every layer of speech and thought, stroke of light on bark or walls, every smell, pothole, pain, crack, delusion, held still and held together - radiant, everlasting. (Munro, Lives 210)

[9] An art object may then be nonhierarchic, showing "an organization of material in fragments," breaking climactic structures, making an even display of elements over the surface with no climatic place or moment, since the materials are "organized into many centers" (Blau DuPlessis 264, quoting deBretteville).

journal? What do I want it to be? Like the chair in the bedroom that collects all my clothes for a week at a time?-- but I know where everything is? My father's carpentry shop that holds glorious treasures only he can find (an antique radio, oily green paint, handmade nails, wooden toys, engine parts all jumbled beautifully together, that does embrace the "solemn, slight" [Woolf's Writer's Diary, 13] and beautiful in a material way; like an artwork where objects are distributed evenly and all equally important.)

"the desire to please"-- is what all this agonizing is about, pleasing that great gray ghost? If taken, as is necessary in any writing, with "the desire to reveal" (Blau DuPlessis 266), is it possible or honest to do both? Compromise not being entirely pleasing, is some kind of balance possible, and is this what Woolf manages to pull off so beautifully?

Is it desirable to blur between a journal/ poem/ dissertation/ communique? Or is all of what I've just done, indeed, "crap in three easy lessons"? (Ascher in Blau DuPlessis 268)-- (in my case, five difficult ones). Always the fear, the embarrassment that my writing IS crap-- overly emotional, insufficiently logical, too-womanly, not rigorous enough, pseudointellectual babble, and certainly not art. I had another moment of recognition in reading Spender: "There always seems to be a voice hovering around, making sarcastic remarks. It's always a male voice and it's always full of ridicule" (230). That seems just another way of keeping things the way they've always been-- to encourage writers to be self-censoring. It's better to run the risk of being told that what you do is crap, babble, a poor imitation of Woolf, H.D., Cixous, Gubar, Rich, than to surrender to "them," whoever they are.

And there can be other voices "hovering around," but hearing them in the din is an art that takes perfecting. If I listen carefully I can sometimes hear a voice making sarcastic remarks back.

> And [this is] why I, who am a science-fiction writer and not a scholar, must wrestle in my not-very-abundant spare time with this ungainly monster. Because you, you critics, have not already done so (preferably a century ago).
>
> If you don't like my book, write your own.
>
> Please! (Russ 130)

Voices that spur, that prod: my mother's "Give 'em hell" as she dropped me off at school on oral report days; a student in Women and Literature who, when asked to evaluate my course, wrote simply, "It made me a better woman"; the campus feminist group that insisted I had the courage to present an inclusive language policy to the entire faculty. Voices that laugh. I said that the half hour I waited to hear results of my oral defense was "the longest half hour of my life." "Honey," said a tutor, "you haven't been in labor yet."

What's missing in a dissertation: "that feeling of infinite possibility which challenged us to think and live differently" (Sara Lennox quoted in Blau DuPlessis 274), and "that sudden access of light, that soundless blow, which changes forever one's map of the world" (Russ 137). The "normal" acceptable thesis is dry, objective, detached, scientific. I am not a scientist. I am not objective. I want to stop pretending that I can be objective about texts with which (I almost wrote "whom") I am passionately engaged. They are lifelines, not bankbooks ("victim to the economic situation" [Lennox in Blau DuPlessis 274] indeed!).

These are questions and problems I've been grappling with for a long time; only once before have I put them into words. This is from an essay I wrote during my first year at university:

> School, as I have seen it through the last fifteen years, is not a human, living and breathing phenomena. Everything is distant from both the student and the teacher. The classrooms are sparse, square and brightly, hurtingly modern; they have no color or warmth to humanize the learning process. The teacher typically fits with precision into the predetermined mold: scientist-like, with no passion or reverence for the great things he teaches-- only matter-of-fact, bland acceptance as dry and as tasteless as his polyester ties. No true wonder is left, and all blood, juice and passion have been wrung from him. Understanding and revering his subject is not as important as getting it all over with.

This was the first essay I'd dared to write in a voice unlike the dry, academic one I then usually (and now usually) assume; it was incited by Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance's ideas on teaching ("this blind, rote, eternal naming of things ... the desiccating lifeless voice of dualistic reason") and my rage at a Shakespeare prof (he reduced every play to a Scantron multiple choice exam and insisted only that we keep our pencil marks inside the boxes).

This is like Bogus Trumper's feeling (while writing a dissertation, strangely enough) wondering, "How is everything related to everything else?" "Jesus, I should keep a diary," Bogus thinks. This kind of writing does help one to see the connections, but will it help one get a degree?

Reading this over, one word keeps recurring: honesty. I've used it, it seems, as a kind of shorthand. What I mean by honesty in writing a thesis includes making a real effort to recognize and reconcile contradictions that might occur-- for example, the fact that I'm "blaspheming" the academy, money, religion, traditional sex roles, hierarchies of all kinds, and yet I'm a (marginal) member of the academy who worries about money, who must rank-order and prioritize (ugh) my work in order to write anything, who would likely defend "useless academics" to anyone that complained. By "honesty" I mean that I want to avoid the too-common tendency to gloss over textual controversies or contradictions (I hope to tackle the incredulity I've noticed when I tell people Irving is included in a thesis on feminist comedy). Also, I want my writing to have integrity: the question "Where do YOU stand in relation to the questions?" is relevant; I know I'm not objective, that as a white orthodoxly educated American feminist, my "angle of refraction" is very different from someone else's.

So why is the antihierarchical stance important? Why is it important to undermine traditional structure? And why do I advocate lawlessness? That word again: to be "honest"; feminism, like charity, begins at home: I can't advocate or even explain textual lawlessness and lack of traditional structure if I'm unable or unwilling to practice what I preach. Too, I have to be able to understand what is involved when writers do this: the risks, the consequences, the frighteningness of it all. It's too easy to sit back, be smug and bang out a bunch of traditional chapters on untraditional writers-- and too hypocritical. How can I advocate blowing up the law if I'm following it to the letter? Or praise the shattering of institutions if I'm sitting cozily within one? As I said before, it's going to be necessary that I compromise somewhat in writing this, but I'll try hard to maintain the balance. I don't know what will happen as I try to find a voice appropriate to write this-- I can't maintain comic derision over 200 pages, I don't think, and it's difficult to keep my sense of humor intact while 70 first-year students, family, money, various organizations and sundry intrusions tug on my hands.

> **Although crammed with facts and references, it has the wrong style; it is personal and sounds unscholarly, a charge often leveled at modern feminist writing. That is, the tone is not impersonal, detached, and dry enough— in short, not patriarchal enough— to produce belief.** (Russ 75, on Woolf's Three Guineas)

Another introductory note: why I chose these texts

One question I studiously avoided answering on my candidacy exams (I can admit it now) asked me to justify my choice of texts for discussion in this thesis. Like many other choices in life, I knew I had a perfectly good reason; I just couldn't put it into words (can one be rational about the choice of career, speciality, or other matters of taste?) Of course that is shilly-shallying, conflict avoidance, and possibly dangerous. Since then, I've been thinking about why I chose the novels of Atwood, Irving, Pym, and Spark, and I've clarified four reasons:

1. Their themes illustrate major feminist questions or problems.
2. Their styles, different though they are, delighted me.
3. They are all quietly revolutionary in subject and form.
4. They are ordinary.

In my earliest thinking about feminist comedy, something that started about six years ago, certain themes seemed to recur in the novels and short stories I read so unsystematically and with so little guidance. I was so intrigued by the patterns common to Atwood's Surfacing and Chopin's The Awakening that I wrote my M.A. thesis comparing them as Canadian/ American "female journey" novels, including some overly solemn interpretation of water and nature images and an entire chapter on social background that the committee insisted I relegate to an appendix ("Conspicuous Consumption and the Servant-Wife" was thought to have little bearing on Edna's dilemma). Atwood's novels The Edible Woman and Lady Oracle taught me that it was possible to put across difficult and dangerous ideas in a voice bubbling over with laughter, and I continued to read other funny feminists, noticing constantly their preoccupations with the social ties that bind: the church, the school, the self-- and their success in making these institutions seem bizarre, ridiculous, and unnecessary, instead of celebrating them as absolutes that must be lived within.[10] My chosen writers also had some other qualities in common: a

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10. Natalie Zemon Davis writes of theories of the "disorderly" and unstable woman in early modern Europe. Ruled by the lower, she was a figure of chaos.

> What were the proposed remedies for female unruliness? Religious training that fashioned the reins of modesty and humility, selective education that showed a woman her moral duty without enflaming her undisciplined imagination or loosing her tongue for public talk; honest work to busy her hands, and laws and constraints that made her subject to her husband (149).

I began researching this thesis in hopes that I would be able to explain how institutions came to wield such power in the lives of my authors' characters and, by extension, in my own life. Part of my decision to split the thesis into the three divisions of the academy, the church, and the self was a personal reckoning with these forces: a feminist graduate student raised in a conservative church can hardly disregard these institutions.

The idea of the self as an institution as influential as the others came with considerably more difficulty. Partly I wondered why feminist colleagues had trouble with my description of the achievement of a "solid inner core" as one of the proper goals of feminist comedy. Part of this stemmed from my interest in clothing and the body in feminist texts-- if one inhabits these things, how do they influence one? And part of this was wondering about an exam question on "assumption of alternate identities." Zemon Davis' belief that an unruly woman could be conquered by making her "subject to" certain conditions is certainly relevant. I tried then to connect the "big" and "public" institutions of church and school with the "small" and "private" self-- how do they influence each other? How do they infect us with sexist ideas and assumptions?

Althusser, in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," examines the school and the church as teachers of mastery of the practices of exploitation and repression. State repressive apparatuses (police, courts, prisons, army) function through violence. Although these are certainly present in the works of my authors (particularly Irving and Atwood), it is the more subtle and insidious "ideological state apparatuses" (ISAs) that I want to examine, especially as they prop up existing society. Like Woolf in her analysis of the private home, Althusser insists that the larger part of the work done by these ISAs (religious, education, family, legal, cultural) occurs in private (135), in a way that is "extremely well blended in" (146). As I discuss in concern with telling the story and incorporation of "extra-textual" material: reviews, letters, sermons, a dissertation, recipes.

All four writers of feminist comedy satirize and deride these institutions, recognizing their power yet refusing to accept it. Barbara Pym, for example, seems to be writing in the "sweet old English lady" tradition, yet her texts posit an unofficial and almost exclusively women's world. The authors use feminist comedy to deride the insidiousness of "the official story."

The politics of my choice of texts is something I'll treat more fully in the Postscript. But one political point: I enjoyed reading these novels as feminist comedy because of the very incongruity of doing so. That is, I've examined writers who are sometimes seen as "mainstream" (though not usually thought of as academic) and explored them as marginal texts-- as feminist comedy. Irving is as often compared to Dickens as Pym is to Austen, yet if viewed through the lens of comic

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Chapters 1 and 2, Althusser believes that education has replaced religion in its influence, though both remain important in countless private and public ways. I examine education as the contemporary "saving grace" in society, an institution whose presented goals and techniques differ very little from many religions ("bettering yourself," whether monetarily, intellectually, or spiritually, for example, is a key idea). But it is the effect of these institutions that I try to explain: that they come to be regarded as "natural" and "beneficial" (Althusser 147), and how difficult it is to unwind the threads of the influence from any text.

Althusser spends considerable time on "the ideological subject," saying that ideology "recruits and transforms subjects through interpellation ('hailing')" (162), giving as example the fact that identity is almost always constructed before birth, through the ritual that surrounds the expectation of birth (164). Catherine Belsey similarly attacks the supposed stability of the humanist subject, saying that what she wants to do is to "point to the imaginary nature of so much that liberal humanism promises-- to us now" (89), chiefly the belief that human beings are sole authors of their history. It will be my contention in Chapter 3 that one's identity is an unstable assemblage that is constructed through the influences of institutions like the academy, the church, and the idea of the autonomous self.

feminism, these handy labels dissolve. One would expect writers in the tradition of Austen and Dickens to celebrate-- not deride-- conservative values: marriage, the nuclear family, the church, the value of education. To see an "old" text in a "new" way is a common concern in feminist criticism (The Madwoman in the Attic, for example, demonstrated some previously "hidden traditions" in women's literature). I wanted to work with texts that, while not necessarily academic, were readily accessible and familiar to a large number of readers. This somewhat poses the old question about preaching to the converted: did I want to share my views on feminist comedy only with those well versed in academic study? Academic feminists are very often unfairly categorized as dwellers of the ivory tower, so I must admit some glee when someone at a party would realize s/he had heard of some of my writers, and had definite opinions on them. I've discussed Garp with a Marxist political scientist, a Welsh entrepreneur and a hospital administrator, my mother and a saleswoman at a department store, several graduate students and a social worker. Spark's Brodie has provided endless delight and discussions from my students and colleagues.

Of course these writers are not the most radical feminist comics writing today. There are others more anarchic-- Monique Wittig, Fay Weldon, Rita Mae Brown, Zora Neale Hurston, a burgeoning number of lesbian and/or feminist comics (see Ms. Jan./Feb. 1992), now enjoying greater success than ever before (thought most admit the necessity of compromise in their public performances, as I do). But I wanted to begin the whole process with writers not ordinarily thought of as feminist comics, or as remotely revolutionary; and it seems to me that including a male writer in a study of and by feminists is fairly unusual anyway.

These "quietly revolutionary" authors lack squeamishness. Even Pym, by far the most subtle of the four, takes great joy in mocking those in power; Spark, Atwood, and Irving, in varying degrees, gleefully attack what is considered "normal" in society and "acceptable" writing topics and styles. They dare. None of the four authors allows you to close the book feeling smug, comfortable, or merely entertained. The rug is liable to be pulled from under your feet. Spark, whose novels look so thin and elegant and stylish, makes you acutely uncomfortable--civilized people turn out to be savages, trusted teachers are fascists. Once Atwood allows you to be comfortable with one story (I am a Handmaid, things happened to me like this), she lets the elevator free-fall (I am still a Handmaid, but it really happened to me like this. Or THIS). Irving's world is nightmarish and fairy-talish by turns: a bear is really a person, a childhood friend is a killer, a Ph.D dissertation parallels real life. Pym, who looks so conventional on the surface, slyly and wickedly celebrates "un-marriage," poverty, and "freedom from unreal loyalties." In short, they share enough common themes to make discussion possible, but all four are different enough to allow good textual arguments and some variety for me (I'm only human, after all). (They're also all available in paperback).

Finally, the women and men of these novels seem "like us." They seem real, and ordinary. They are people I'd like to have to dinner sometime. Unlike other literary characters, I feel comfortable with them (Gatsby would be a pain, all sighs and mysteries; a Hemingway hero would insist that I cook; I envision other literary greats monopolizing the conversation, drinking far too much port wine, rhapsodizing on just why he ate the plums/ dared not eat the peach; upsetting the other guests with talk of saintly motorcyclists, Imagism or some such). I could quite happily break (homemade) bread with Garp, moan with Spark's Jane over avoiding carbohydrates, or binge on Kentucky Fried with Joan Delacourt. Pym's heroines would be the ultimate dinner guests, though-- witty, wise, and down-to-earth, not given to complaining over the cauliflower cheese (unless an unfortunate caterpillar showed up).

The point is, though these characters seem ordinary, they are "amazing, unfathomable, and simple-- deep caves paved with kitchen linoleum" (Munro 258) - it is their ordinariness, their worry about money, food, clothes, writing dissertations, splitting up the housework-- that is extraordinary.[11] How often can that kind of truth be told? (The Women's Room was vilified for dwelling so much on polishing furniture, cleaning toilets, childbirth or unsatisfying sex; critics seemed to argue that realism is fine when it involves sleazy nightclubs or gutting rabbits, but really, who wants to hear about Mira's period? As a reviewer wrote of Anne Sexton, "a poem entitled

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[11] Until women's experiences are communicated as fully as men's experiences have been, a great part of the world is missing for readers. Men have been able to tell us about their experiences in war, in men's schools, in locker rooms and in male-only sports-- even unhappy marriages from a male point of view (for example, Updike's Rabbit series). All these experiences have been validated through inclusion in literature, art, myth, anecdote; the equivalent part of female experience has been, until very recently, obscured or lost altogether, because it is not embedded in our cultures (see Showalter's "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" for a thorough explanation of this). "Kitchen talk," "mother talk," coffee klatsches, bawdy humor and washroom gossip have not been generally accessible to both sexes.

Not only are women's voices and styles lost, but the content of our lives is gone. The "common woman" rarely appears in literature. It is partly in tribute to Spark's and Pym's examination of usually unexamined lives that I include their writing in this thesis. And, while Atwood's and Irving's characters may occasionally do fantastic or extraordinary things, they behave in ways that are familiar to many of us.

'Menstruation at Forty' was the straw that broke the camel's back" [quoted in Russ 28].) I admire these novels because their writers try so hard, in varying ways, to tell the truth about the lives of supposedly ordinary people.

One other reason that occurs to me, one that may sound contradictory: these novels suit my purpose-- celebrating and exploring feminist comedy-- because they have a foot in each of the worlds of "academic" and "mass appeal." They are widely read and popular; in that sense, they are practical. The laughter they incite encourages us to analyze what we normally take for granted (do we force women into bear suits? is a Gilead possible here and now? does women's survival depend on their measurements?) I'll equivocate here: I think these novels are revolutionary enough, in style alone, without alienating those who might be new or uncertain initiates to "dizzying" feminist comedy (I wouldn't start a class on feminist comedy with Les Guérillères, for instance). This is why I call them "quietly revolutionary"-- their art is not pretentious, but it stays with you for a long time after reading. The books make you work just hard enough without deafening you (with academic jargon, heavy symbolism, or arcane language) to the essential message. My admiration for these novelists' practicality, wide appeal, and accessibility probably stems from my own formation in the U.S. "pragmatic feminist" mld and steeping in the rather American disdain for highfalutin ideas that don't get anything DONE. These writers get something done: they take care of business, they make us laugh, and they turn things upside down into the bargain.

Salute to Foremothers: or, important stuff that wouldn't fit in elsewhere

Acknowledging other feminist writers is rather like including some of my experience-- but not all-- in the top layer as emblematic or symbolic of other women's experience. Any thesis includes some sins of omission. Though such sins are, of course, my own, earlier writers have eroded boundaries between the personal and the critical, and allowed me to take stylistic risks in this thesis. I'd like to mention a few here.

Most influential has been Virginia Woolf, particularly her Three Guineas, which focuses on the academy and the church as institutions. But Woolf's style in 3G was remarkable to me: by turns acerbic, irreverent, solemn, poetic, and scholarly, with a thoroughness that I admired greatly. Though 3G, written in 1938, is one of the earlier examples of feminist comedy I've discussed, it is one of the most revolutionary because of the content: institutions major and minor are targets of her scorn. Further, Woolf's style is comic and feminist:

> [Woolf] parodies the dominator's style, not only by restating her feminist themes in Aristotelian syllogisms which make a travesty of masculine logic, mocking and destroying the patriarch's explanations of 'mankind,' but also by using the footnoted dissertationese which is supposed to overwhelm with unanswerable evidence, and is as biased in its choice of evidence as the logical propositions. (Marshall 167)

By using "footnoted dissertationese" in juxtaposition to more personal concerns, I've hoped to point out some of the shortcomings of traditional academic style.

Perhaps equally influential, but in a different way, has been Rachel Blau DuPlessis' "For the Etruscans," as well as her Writing Beyond the Ending and The Pink Guitar-- all of which emulate Woolf's "guerilla warfare" comedy, and which stylistically have a good deal in common with

Woolf's comic/theoretical writing: jokes, puns, incantations, utopianism. Though appearing about half a century after ROO and 3G, Blau DuPlessis' "Etruscans" was the next essay that seemed to be comfortable with its own eccentric voice, characterized by "an encyclopedic impulse ... symbolized by and announced in a long work, like the modern long poem" (271). Much of the top layer of my Introduction was written as a response to this essay. "Etruscans" was able to articulate the author's worries about bath mats, Fig Newtons, cottage cheese, finding an "ambiguously nonhegemonic voice," in order to "represent and re-create the texture of the modern female aesthetic she is attempting to define: fluid, nonlinear, decentralized, nonhierarchic, and many-voiced" (Showalter 15).

Adrienne Rich's work does not bear many surface or stylistic resemblances to Blau DuPlessis', though they are roughly contemporary (1970s and 80s); Rich's writing is more obviously "academic" in approach. However, her On Lies, Secrets and Silence and Of Woman Born are also structured as personal "journeys" as much as feminist commentary or theory. Of Woman Born, in particular, uses Rich's experience as mother of three sons as a spinning off point from which to discuss and analyze "motherhood as experience and institution." We find out much about her personal life and how it connects to larger questions. Rich often uses herself as an example (a symbol?) of a woman shaped by ideology. The trend toward (and then away from) experience-based feminism is discussed in more detail in my Postscript; however, I should say here that many of the writers who most influenced me as a feminist incorporated "personal" writing with the theoretical.

From the 1980s, the decade I spent in college and graduate school, several writers affected me deeply: one source for my unconventional style was Susan Griffin's Pornography and Silence, a theoretical work which nonetheless blurs the lines usually drawn between poetry and criticism or social commentary. This work is rigorously researched and thoughtfully written, yet speaks in a voice which is passionate and personally involved. And Joanna Russ' How to Suppress Women's Writing is encyclopedic, valuable as a resource for feminist literature courses - and deeply comic. Russ mixes scholarly research with personal observation and indignation, a view that posits her experience as revealing as an example of women's treatment under patriarchy. For example, she describes her attempt to write a conclusion to her book:

> I had planned to consult with a Black colleague, but when I approached her in the hall she had a crowd of students about, all of them talking, a stack of books in one arm, a mass of student papers in the other, seven committee reports wedged in between, as well as her small daughter in a backpack, and she was looking surreptitiously at her watch. (137)

Here Russ manages to suggest, without pretension, the problems inherent in trying to write accessible, good, and scholarly work. Her colleagues, like Russ herself, like me (like you?) are physically and mentally juggling. In one small observation, a woman's concern with teaching, research, administrative work, marking, family, and time come together. Russ, the rushed and troubled observer, knows from seeing this tableau that writing a conclusion "was like trying to put the Atlantic Ocean in a teacup" (138).

Nicole Brossard, who began writing as a poet, blurs the lines between theory and poetry. It was her address on feminist writing at the University of Alberta in 1988 that led to much of my thinking about finding a better voice.

> Each theoretical text is followed by a carefully chosen passage from the work of poetry or fiction she was writing at the time. The theoretical text illuminates the entire creative work, while the creative work, which still continues on its independent career, is actually what makes the spirit of the theory manifest. (Forsyth, intro. to The Aerial Letter [13])

I've tried to suggest a few of the techniques and concerns of other feminist writers who, like me, were/are dissatisfied with conventional academic style. There are many others, but time and space don't permit me to discuss them fully: Friedan's The Feminine Mystique (1963) employs first-hand observation and criticism of those suffering from "the problem that has no name"-- a category that includes Friedan herself. Ellen Goodman and Molly Ivins, both journalists writing in the Reagan/Bush years, join personal experience to political questions of gender; Gloria Steinem, whose collection on feminism from the 1960s to 1980s, Outrageous Acts and Everyday Rebellions, is written in comic, fragmented style; Germaine Greer, whose The Female Eunuch takes apart a female's body from "Bones" to "The Wicked Womb," through "Soul," "Love," "Hate," and "Revolution," begins with observations about deformation of female bodies and moves through the deformation of female souls, in a caustic, sometimes ribald style and with exhaustive (almost "academic") detail. And though Marilyn French's The Women's Room (1977) is not, strictly speaking, "academic writing," much philosophy is juxtaposed against Mira's life story. As I've said, this novel, which I read as a first-year college student, seemed to speak directly to me. Such an "authority of experience" approach to feminism, popular in the 1970s, has fallen somewhat out of favor, as I discuss in the Postscript and throughout the thesis. I don't think we should be quickly reject writers like the ones listed above; nor should we fail to scrutinize their methods. These women include personal references not as an exercise in self-indulgence, or as apology, but as a way of showing their connections to and interest in the theoretical work being done. I think that feminism's various approaches have much to offer each other. In the following pages, I hope to "meditate" on some of these approaches.

> 'Is it time,' said Mrs Swithin, 'to go and join--' She left the sentence unfinished, as if she were of two minds, and they fluttered to right and to left, like pigeons rising from the grass.
>
> The audience was assembling. They came streaming along the paths and spreading across the lawn. Some were old; some were in the prime of life. There were children among them. Among them ... were representatives of our most respected familiies .... On the other hand there were new-comers .... And a scatter of odds and ends.
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> .... Rows of chairs, deck-chairs, gilt chairs, hired cane chairs, and indigenous garden seats had been drawn up on the terrace. There were plenty of seats for everybody. But some preferred to sit on a ground. Certainly Miss La Trobe had spoken the truth when she said: 'The very place for a pageant!'
>
> .... Then the play began. Was it, or was it not, the play? .... While they looked apprehensively and some finished their sentences, a small girl, like a rosebud in pink, advanced; took her stand on a mat, behind a conch, hung with leaves and piped:
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> **Gentles and simples, I address you all ...**
>
> So it was the play then. Or was it the prologue? (Woolf, Between the Acts 58-9)

CHAPTER ONE

THE ACADEMY

> By criticizing education, they would help to create a civilized society, which protects culture and intellectual liberty.
> -- Woolf, Three Guineas, 130

Writers of feminist comedy[1] force us to examine what we take for

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[1] Feminist comedy, as the term will be used in this text, is revolutionary in form and content. This comedy derides patriarchal values by giving both sexes equal status; it affirms the multiple nature of the individual and derides society's attempts to make people uniform. It asserts the power of change by revealing the injustices and imperfections of society. In Three Guineas (3G), Woolf attempts to answer the question of "how can we enter the professions and yet remain civilized human beings"? (79) She decides that the four great teachers of educated men's daughters-- poverty, chastity, derision and freedom from unreal loyalties-- must be tempered with "some wealth, some knowledge, and some service to real loyalties" (79).

Woolf admits that "derision" is a bad and inadequate word, but adds that it means "you must refuse all methods of advertising merit, and hold that ridicule, obscurity and censure are preferable, for psychological reasons, to fame and praise" (80). Her mockery of society's institutions-- churches, schools, governments-- is accomplished in Three Guineas through two styles: one "rational, logical, legalistic" and the other "loose, inventive, chatty, exploring every nook and cranny" (Blau DuPlessis 264). Much of her comedy, like that of the authors to be discussed in this chapter, arises from such juxtaposition. Many writers of feminist comedy regard everything with skeptical eyes: the ways in which human beings are socialized, the values upheld, are mocked, through techniques of interruption, inversion, exaggeration, and lack of closure. Feminist comedy's major difference from "classical" or "traditional" comedy is the former's status as "wild" and outside, living on the margins. Classical comedy almost always reaffirms the rightness of the status quo and the wrongness of those "outside."

Integration of the individual into society has always been an important part of traditional comedy: for example, Shakespeare's marriage comedies use legal union of male and female to symbolize such integration. Northrop Frye's Anatomy of Criticism describes the pattern followed by most New Comedy: in this traditional comic style, a young man desires something (usually a woman) but is blocked by a character with more money and/or power. Through time and chance the obstacle is removed and the goal is attained, with the hero returning as a part of society. Socialization is a key idea in such comedy: "The action of the comedy ... moves towards the incorporation of the hero into the society that he naturally fits" (44). (See "The Mythos of Spring: Comedy," pp. 163-186; also, the concept of "naturally fitting in" will be discussed at length in Chapter 3). Interestingly, this type of conventional comedy granted. In this chapter, I'd like to examine the ways in which feminist comics address traditional education, and discuss the solutions for change that they suggest. Linked to this is the "education" (in terms of "seeing in a new way") of myself and of my readers. I mean that my writing of this anti-thesis, meta-dissertation has been educational for me, opening my mind to the revolutionary possibilities of feminist comedy. I want this "knowledge" to be communicated as clearly as possible to other people. Feminism stresses the need to question established power structures, and the knowledge that props them up. Many feminists, and other social reformers, hold a certain faith in the benefits of education: that education is the route for changing the lot of members of oppressed groups. Woolf, while she advocates overthrow of hierarchical education in Three Guineas, still argues that women must have access to education in some form. But "education," to Woolf and other revolutionary feminists, involves less the learning of a formally structured set of facts than a questioning or skeptical stance. Such an interrogative attitude is important to maintain when reading or listening. Woolf describes this perfectly in Three Guineas when she

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is usually written for the younger males in the audience. Frye's established pattern holds true not only for Greek "new comedy," Shakespeare, or Dickens, but also in many twentieth century comic novels. Richler's The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz (1959) and John Kennedy Toole's A Confederacy of Dunces (1980) follow Frye's established pattern. Duddy and Ignatius are blocked from what they desire and go through a number of comic misadventures to obtain it. At the end of the novel, they are re-integrated into society: Duddy makes his money, buys his land and, as we are told in St. Urbain's Horseman (1966), is accepted as a success of the capitalistic society that once rejected him. Ignatius, at story's end, flees his weirdly unsociable, near-agoraphobic existence and takes to the road with "that Jewish minx." Lucky Jim (1953), Kingsley Amis' aspiring academic, also is put through much the same wringer in order to obtain what he desires most. The "happy ending ... return to society" pattern, following the "hero's journey" as defined by Joseph Campbell, is often implicit in other traditional comedies, and in critics' analyses.

holds an imaginary conversation with "some daughter of an educated man," interested in politics. Woolf questions her reading of three daily newspapers and three weeklies: "But why three? Do they differ then about facts, and if so, why?" The daughter replies that each paper is financed by a board, which has a policy; that writers are employed to expound that policy, and that if writers disagree, they are then unemployed. "Therefore if you want to know any fact about politics you must read at least three different papers, compare at least three different versions of the same fact, and come in the end to your own conclusion" (95). Woolf suggests the multiple nature of facts when she realizes that each statement has a money motive, a power motive, an advertisement motive, a publicity motive, a vanity motive (96).

Part of this stance involves skepticism and derision. Cuddy-Keane writes that Woolf's comedy establishes a topsy-turvy world which "challenges our basic assumptions about reality .... Its thrust is not toward answers but towards questions" (280). This communication can come about through the provocation-- and possibly irritation-- that the novels and my analysis of them will provide.[2] Comedy reveals the inadequacies of education, through characters like Bogus, Joan

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[2] Critics have recognized comedy's ability to educate: it is this potential that feminist comic writers exploit. However, the traditional ("classic") function of comedy has been the role of the enforcer. Laughter directed against an individual (or a society, as in Polish or Irish jokes) is a powerful force. It is this conservative aspect of comedy, the use of mockery to deride the "outsider," that is probably the most familiar. Such mockery occurs in the schoolyard, for example, with the "team spirit" of conformity so detested by Jean Brodie. As Bergson observes, such laughter is complicitous: "Our laughter is always the laughter of a group" (64). The comic character is traditionally unable to adapt to society (Malvolio, Alceste); this lack of adjustment, according to Bergson, begins with "a growing callousness to social life" (148). Society is a "boot camp," modeling conformity through humiliation. The eccentric, the different, the "not-normal" are ridiculed by the inner circle, with what Kronenberger calls "the laughter of malice" being used to reinforce the status quo. For

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example, in the traditional comedy of manners and in the drama of Jonson and Molière, the "satirical theory of comedy follows classical principles, and the deviants are ridiculed for violating accepted norms" (Little 9). In The Misanthrope, Alceste's very isolation and eccentricity make him a target of mockery; Dobrée describes Restoration "critical comedy" as corrective, ridiculing vice and social excesses (202).

Bakhtin traces the uses of laughter from Rabelaisian times to our own, noting that medieval humor celebrated abundance and justice for all (99). Eventually, however, literary critics, particularly La Bruyère, labelled Rabelaisian comedy as negative because of its sexual and scatological obscenity and objected to its use of "curses, oaths, double entendres, and vulgar quips" (109). Such laughter deteriorated, Bakhtin writes, from a universal and communal activity to more exclusionary personal invective. Popular or folk-culture laughter became "reduced laughter": humor, irony and sarcasm. Rabelais was attacked by the monks and his books condemned by the Sorbonne (269).

In keeping with the later and more conservative functions of laughter, Bergson views laughter as having an "averaging" effect; it mocks the eccentric and "represses man's separatist tendency" (74). The comic figure initially abandons social conventions; the audience is briefly sympathetic, but eventually becomes a group of enforcers, using laughter to humiliate. To mock a man is to attempt to make him fit into the group. Bergson sees laughter as a social gesture which promotes general improvement, but the "improvement" is a reinforcement of the status quo. Unsociability, isolation and eccentricity are comic, and laughter's function is to "readapt individuals to the whole" (174). It is a fair generalization to say that much early comedy mocked the "outsider" figure-- one who is, by personality or physicality, left out. Frye sees integration into society as the theme of most comic fiction, with social climbing an important focus of this integration (Anatomy 43). Here the comic figure surrenders his eccentric isolation and is able to return to society.

Wylie Sypher, in Comedy, points out a trend in contemporary comedy; he states that recent comedy has tended to focus on the outsider. This is not, as in conventional comedy, the outsider as comic because she is a misfit, but outsider as sympathetic character. As Little notes when she writes of "inversion," those on the "inside" are now comic. Sypher exemplifies this by tracing critics' sympathies for and against Shylock. He notes that Shylock has been "rehabilitated," and that it is no longer possible to make the eccentric only a figure of fun. He explains this tendency by examining the purpose or aim of comedy.

In contemporary comedy, the "integration" pattern so finely developed by Frye and Bergson no longer absolutely applies: Kafka is one notable example. Some non-feminist postwar novelists like Tom Robbins and Kurt Vonnegut center on the outsider, and his/her trials in a society that has little patience for the eccentric. Billy Pilgrim, Rudy Waltz, Kilgore Trout, Bonanza Jellybean and Sissy Hankshaw remain "not normal" or outsiders at story's end. Although they do surrender some aspects of eccentricity (Sissy gives up an outsized thumb, for instance), they reject society's prescriptions for happiness. It is notable that very

Delacourt, Jean Brodie, Jane, and Prudence. But comedy can also educate

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few of these antisocial characters marry-- the traditional sign of integration and acceptance by society.

In feminist comedy, the refusal of convention is even more radical. Where mainstream comedy attempts to push the outsider back into the fold, revolutionary comedy mocks the fold itself, by mocking "norms thousands of years old" (Little 2) and advocates complete abandonment, or at the very least questioning, of all we take for granted. The fear of the "team spirit" and of conventional society is prominent, as in Woolf's Outsiders' Society. The policy of disengagement and of questioning bedrock-solid virtues is a strong force. With these writers, nothing is sacred: the family, motherhood, roles that determine identity are fodder for comedy.

> Mary was telling Kate, detail by detail ... the teacher's recommendations for the child's "better integration." The phrases followed each other: well-adjusted, typical, normal, integrated, secure, normative; and soon they were smiling....
>
> ... Kate ... told Mary how a counsellor had once come on a similar errand about Eileen .... "She said," said Kate, "that Eileen's problems would be easily supported and solved in a well-structured family unit like ours." Mary suddenly let out a snort of laughter. "A unit," said Kate. "Yes, a unit she said we were. Not only that, a nuclear unit." They laughed. They began to roar, to peal, to yell with laughter, Mary rolling on her bed, Kate in her chair. Other occasions came to mind, each bringing forth its crop of irresistible words. At each new one, they rolled and yelled afresh .... soon quite ordinary words were doing this, not the jargon like parent-and-child confrontation, stress situation, but even "sound," "ordered," "healthy," and so on. And then they were shrieking at "family" and "home" and "mother" and "father." (Lessing 167-8)

Along with laughing at labels, even-- especially-- the ways in which we traditionally learn and teach are questioned.

Judy Little's important study, Comedy and the Woman Writer, explores comedy and feminism in Woolf and Spark. She uses the term "liminal" to describe their comic imagery. A limen is a threshold, where one is neither in one world or another. Little uses the term to embody a "permanently inverted world" where identities and the structures that define them are in flux. Though Melba Cuddy-Keane objects to Little's use of the term to describe Woolf's Between the Acts, she goes onto say that "Woolf's comedy ... celebrates an irreversible dismantling of order and actually advocates a permanent instability" (280). Little contends that feminist comedy centers on subverting the imagery of festive life passages (marriage, birth, death, sex, holidays), an activity she calls the "politics of holiday" (66). Bakhtin's Rabelais and His World, on which several theories of feminist comedy draw, analyzes the folk culture of Rabelais: "Marked by gross robust humor, extravagance of caricature, or bold naturalism" (Intro.). Participants in folk culture question (temporarily) the limits put upon them. Mary F. Robertson's term for Anne Tyler's characters applies well here: "boundary-us, by giving us a strange new world:

> ... the word "husband" had isolated itself and they had to laugh. They could not stop themselves. They began improvising, telling anecdotes or describing situations, in which certain words were bound to come up: wife, husband, man, woman ... they laughed and laughed. "The father of my children," one woman would say; "the breadwinner," said the other, and they shrieked like harpies.
>
> It was a ritual, like the stag parties of suburban men in which everything their normal lives are dedicated to upholding is spat on, insulted, belittled. (Lessing 168)

Dobrée explains comic liminality further by saying that Shakespeare's period was "tragic" while the Restoration period was "comic." He justifies the latter label by saying that values were changing with alarming speed. Society must adjust to general instability: in times like this "policy is insecure, religion is doubted and being revised, and morality is in a state of chaos" (202). This description coincides with Little's ideas about "liminal" times. At such "betwixt and between" times, people must develop a philosophy of life, whether of religion, comedy, or both. When identities are doubted and institutions questioned-- liminal times-- one has no pre-existing structure to rely on. Traditional structures and rules no longer apply. For example, in *Othello*, Desdemona believes her identity is founded upon her husband's: "When I loved thee not, chaos did come again." Scarlett O'Hara, to use a more prosaic example, finds her prewar way of behaving impractical, even ridiculous; the same is true for Spark's *Girls of Slender Means*. Liminal characters abound in Woolf's and Spark's work-- Orlando, for instance, has the special ability to be constantly in the margins (Little 69), since s/he had no childhood and avoided "primary socialization," such as traditional education and religious training.

The link between religion and comedy will be treated at length in Chapter 2. However, it's important to note that both Bakhtin and Little examine comedy as a philosophy or attitude to life. Little notes the inversions that occur in the New Testament, quoting Kirkegaard: "the idea of Christianity is so great that all others disappear alongside it (the romantic and humorous aspect of Christianity)" (quoted 105). Further, Victor Turner (who uses "liminoid" to describe Woolf's comedy) equates the ascetic searcher for God with the social reformer. He believes that both are "outsiders," placing themselves outside the normal structures to experience liminality (see Little 179, Cuddy-Keane 280, 284). I would add that certain aspects of feminism overlap with some of Christianity, most notably the determination to be different from the norm and to reject worldly standards of intrinsic worth; also, the relinquishment of tradition and worldly expectations are similar, although for very different reasons. If viewed from a traditional angle, Woolf's "poverty, chastity and freedom from unreal loyalties" could be a religious philosophy. It is comic in the deepest sense that Woolf endows these qualities with feminist implications.

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doubters."

> **that world is booby trapped, and the complacency and superiority that the reader expects to share with writers of traditional comedy and satire are major victims of these traps.** (Davis 13)

Comic writers make us "recognize the false, ephemeral, mechanical and sordid so that we may despise and reject them" (Davis 16).[3] I want to suggest in this chapter that much of the traditional education that the novelists' characters endure is, indeed, "false, ephemeral, mechanical and sordid," and to suggest ways in which a comic stance[4] can reveal and remedy this.

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[3] Comic theorist Henri Bergson stresses this mechanical aspect of comedy. Labeling it "mechanical elasticity" (67), he indicates that such inflexibility can be physical-- hence, obviously and blatantly comic ("a man wearing a toupee and a fat woman trying to get through a revolving door at the same time," [Hollander cartoon in Barreca 201], or mental, as in absentmindedness ("a character following up his one idea" [67]). To impose rigid order or machine-like precision on a flexible human body or mind is inevitably comic. Woolf, in Three Guineas, questions the worth of the procession of educated men by highlighting its likeness to a machine: "All these hundreds of years they have been mounting these steps, passing in and out of these doors, ascending those pulpits, preaching, money-making, administering justice" (18). It is an image of toy soldiers marching, wind-up cars racing madly, jack-in-the-boxes popping up on cue: "... whatever these ceremonies may mean you perform them always together, always in step, always in the uniform proper to the man and the occasion" (20). Other writers of feminist comedy also emphasize the mechanical and automatic aspects of education: rote learning comes under attack in parodies like A Feminist Alphabet: "V: virginiawoolf: in real-estate parlance, a single room" (Kaufman and Blakely 173).

Bergson (90) suggests that the mechanical aspect in nature, and/or an "automatic" regulation of society, has an effect that is laughable (90). Freud also notes this as the triumph of the automatic action over thought (Jokes 65). Certainly Woolf derides a "a character following up his one idea" through people like Mr. Ramsay, and in accordance with rigid and unbending social structures. Bergson gives us this comic "law": "Any arrangement of acts and events is comic which gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement" (105). It is possible to give this law a feminist slant by interpreting patriarchal acts and events as mechanical (because rigid and automatic) and therefore comic.

[4] A "comic stance" involves an attitude of questioning and irreverence, an awareness of complexity, and a refusal to accept the world the way it is. Regina Barreca defines women's comedy against mainstream comedy:

Recent generations have grown up at a time when education, not religion, was the chief avenue to "bettering oneself"-- "a mind is a terrible thing to waste." Members of my generation live their lives with the unexamined assumption that education is a good thing; with knowledge, we can be empowered (but empowering depends on definition: is money power? is a good job power? is a Ph.D power?). Woolf believed the government's purpose should be the provision of "a life of natural happiness"; surely educated men and their daughters will make the world a place in which to "live delightfully" (Thomas Hobbes quoted in Black 192). Stimpson notes "... the American proclivity to look to education rather than to religion to mold character and to create a new social order" (2). This is shown in A Tree Grows in Brooklyn:

> An answer came to Katie. It was so simple that a flash of astonishment that felt like pain shot through her head. Education! That was it! It was education that made the difference! Education would pull them out of the grime and dirt. (Betty Smith 175)

Perhaps because of this quasi-religious zeal, recent perceptions of education have turned from a belief in its intrinsic value ("learning

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> That women write comedies without 'happy endings'; that despite the absence of such an ending, these works can indeed be classified as comedies; that they write comedies which destroy a social order ...; that their comedies may contain very little joyous celebration; that they use comedy not as a safety valve but as an inflammatory device, seeking, ultimately, not to purge desire and frustration but to transform it into action. (8)

My own style effects this type of comic and questioning attitude. Part of any joke involves the necessary doubting of reality, or facts, of the meanings of words (see Chapter 3). This thesis-long joke has at its heart doubt and skepticism about the "one right way" to examine texts, to express interpretations, and to be "scholarly." Doubt often leads to anger and to refusal (see Marcus and Barreca on anger in Last Laughs).

for learning's sake") to a commodity. Like religion, education is believed to have transformative powers; it can elevate us above the "grime and dirt" of the ordinary and everyday. Both structures are viewed as a civilizing influence, smoothing our rough edges and taming our natural savagery. This similarity will be discussed later in this chapter and in Chapter 2. However, it is almost exclusively the "practical" disciplines that are treated with such reverence (several students in my English courses have said how much they'd love to spoil themselves with a whole course on the Victorians or the modernists, but their busy B.Comm programs just didn't allow for such self-indulgences).

> They come into my office very soberly, prepared to be awed. They speak seriously, almost reverently, about 'my career.' They speak of it in exalted hollow voices as if the words were set in gold and mounted over the family china closet -- which they probably are. They come in with a tentative schedule made up of heavy hardware: physics, math, and early Urdu.
>
> And, of course, since I think learning ought to be fun and enlarging to the entire mind, I suggest a course in literature, art, or music. They are shocked: "I don't know if that would be good for my career." .... What I hear is the hollow rattle of someone who's lost his life and doesn't even know it. He thinks he's in control. (French, Bleeding Heart, 226-7, orig. emph.)

Of course, this knowledge-as-commodity idea does not apply only to students, but to their teachers as well; certain topics and specializations are "safe," trendy, and/or marketable. ("'Doesn't she know she'd better not work on a woman?' She'd better now work on a woman." [Blau DuPlessis 260]).

> ... graduate students frequently oriented their efforts toward success in the marketplace. Many displaced academics acknowledged they had chosen courses that would impress prospective employers, dissertations that could be converted easily into books, and advisors who were reputed to have the best record for placing protegés. (Abel 50)

Abel calls this the "commodification of academic work" (50)-- the idea, prevalent in many universities, that useful knowledge is what sells (or what sells is useful knowledge?). My job-hunting Bible, the MLA Guide for PhDs and PhD Candidates, advises, "Academics can be pigeonholed for life by their choice of a thesis topic .... become knowledgeable about a field currently in demand, such as writing, women's studies, computer-aided instruction ..." (Showalter 1). This statement is a perfect example of the "commodification of academic work" (bringing to mind my feeling in the Introduction: "everything I've said relates to money one way or another"). In order to live, thrive or just survive, compromises or even blatant hypocrisy might be inevitable. Ideas (like the present one) perceived to be whimsical, odd, or radical are stillborn, deformed, or smothered because of what Woolf calls "the anger of the professors."[5] In An Academic Question, The Handmaid's Tale, Jane and Prudence, The Water-Method Man, and Memento Mori in particular, the "selling" of certain kinds of knowledge is comically questioned. The political bias inherent in classroom education is especially important

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5. Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" examines repressive techniques-- whether violent or ideological-- in close detail. Education, as Stimpson observed, is now believed more powerful a transformative force than religion. Althusser analyzes education as the dominant ideological state apparatus and its rise to the status of "natural," beneficial, and purged of ideology, as the Church was believed to be centuries ago. He gives a brief overview of the ways in which children learn "techniques ... [and] elements of 'scientific' or 'literary culture,'" as well as the rules of good behavior: "respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination" (127). He attempts to show how the school can and does reproduce dominant ideology. It is ironic, of course, that one of the most common repressive techniques in a school is that of derision-- not in Woolf's sense, but in a conservative sense of mocking those outside the circle. Though I don't wish to open the debate between Marxism and feminism here, Althusser's delineation of ideological state apparatuses is extremely useful in feminist study of institutions; if nothing else, it drives home the pervasiveness of dominant ideology and its saturation of everyday life. Judy Little briefly discusses "primary socialization" and its relation to feminist comedy in Comedy and the Woman Writer.

in these novels; the main characters often begin by comfortably accepting what they are told is the truth. Eventually they begin to see the narrowness of presented "truth." Or, like several of Pym's women, they secretly question the dismissal of some kinds of knowledge:

> "Hospital romances," I said to Dolly that evening when she called round to see us. "That's what I'm reading now. It's a far cry from Mr. Stillingfleet's stuff."
> "Maybe, but it is all life," said Dolly in her firmest tone, "and no aspect of life is to be despised". (AQ 18)

Bogus Trumper plans to write an etymological dictionary of Old Low Norse, which he finds very difficult. The perfect solution: "I started making up a lot of words. It's very hard to tell Old Low Norse from made-up Old Low Norse.

Dr. Wolfram Holster never knew the difference" (WMM 31).

What kind of knowledge does sell? As I'll describe in this chapter, it is the narrow, the specialized, and the so-called "objective":

> Were we honest about traditional education ... we would teach [students] the irony of the gap between stated educational missions and actual educational practices .... there is now entrenched in the liberal arts a curriculum claiming general validity that is, however, based on the experiences, values, and activities of a few. (Andersen 42; quoting Minnich)

The experience, values, and activities of a few. In junior high and high school my only female teachers were in Home Economics (required of all girls until Title IX, when I relievedly took woodshop). Miss Griffith's degree was in science, but they made her teach Home Ec. She was terrible: I still can't braid, crochet, sew, or plan a healthy menu, thank God. I loved English but had no female literature teachers until my senior year in university; I was in graduate school before I realized that something about this was strange.

> To look closely at any institution is to discover the power of men over the lives of women in and around that institution. (Howe in Martin 483)

We were guided by the all-male, all-white school board in my suburban hometown; the Home Ec assignment to poll boys in our class on "What turns you off about the way girls look?"; classes designated by sex: "Girls' Woodshop," "Fall Team Sports for Girls"; or my guidance counselor telling me to learn to type "since so many ladies are secretaries."

> ("You are being naive if you really believe that a situation that has existed as long as written history has changed so much in fifteen or twenty years that you are not going to have to deal with it. You feel lucky. You've escaped. The hell you have. You're still in the convent". [French, Women's Room, 308])

(Shut up, Val. This is too hard. How can I possibly clear-sightedly describe the education in school-- not only in courses-- the religious fervor toward the football team, the day in fifth grade they marched the girls to the gym and showed a snowy black and white 1950s film on menstruation-- and the boys got to play kickball for an hour? Or the two women in Modern World History we could write reports on: Mata Hari and Tokyo Rose? Or freezing our legs in Michigan winters because girls weren't allowed to wear slacks to school?)

In my discussion, I'd like to consider how the revolutionary comedy of my chosen texts mocks "scientific," objective, and specialized knowledge; how conventional ways of teaching and learning are made to seem ritualistic, archaic, and bizarre; and how these novelists promote the idea that "if what women know becomes part of our culture's general knowledge we will inhabit a very different world" (Spender, MSM, 6).

> ... the slaves who are now kept hard at work piling words into books, piling words into articles, as the old slaves piled stones into pyramids, would shake the manacles from their wrists and give up their loathsome labour. ... Whereas now, Madam, at the very mention of culture the head aches, the eyes close, the doors shut, the air thickens; we are in a lecture room, rank with the fumes of stale print, listening to a gentleman who is forced to lecture or to write every Wednesday ... (3G 99)

How has culture turned from something "muscular, adventurous, free" (3G 99) to a cause of headache, heartache and spiritual deformity? Woolf writes of derision and abstinence as necessary to break "the ring, the vicious circle ... the poison tree of intellectual harlotry" (99). Intellectual harlotry is, as she sees it, the near-necessity of tainting one's thoughts with "what sells" or what succeeds. "For who can doubt that once writers had the chance of writing what they enjoy writing they would find it so much more pleasurable that they would refuse to write on any other terms; that readers ... would find it so much more nourishing than what is written for money that they would refuse to be palmed off with the stale substitute any longer?" Culture, untainted by the desire for publicity and money, would nourish the spirit of freedom.

Irving attacks narrow specialization with some glee. Jenny Fields attends Steering School before Garp does, in order to weed out the "stale" courses from the ones which sing-- often "the difference between doing well or poorly in a school" (Garp 71). Weeded out is Stewart Percy's course, "My Part of the Pacific," which focuses entirely upon the two World War II battles which he had personally fought in. "There were no texts for the course, there were only Stewart's lectures and Stewart's personal slide collection" (55). This stuffy and stale education is contrasted with Garp's later European education. As with Garp, in Pym's novels the "authority of experience" is often denied by mainstream education:

> For a moment [Jane] almost regretted her own stillborn 'research' -- 'the influence of something upon somebody' hadn't Virginia Woolf called it?-- to which her early marriage had put an end. She could hardly remember now what the subject of it was to have been -- Donne, was it, and his influence on some later, obscurer poet? (J&P 10)

As I'll discuss a little later on, Jane is similar to Mildred, the "excellent woman"; though she decries her lack of higher education, each woman is closely observant, brave and witty. It is unfortunate that the experiences of Pymian women like Jane and Mildred are often not thought to be worthy of serious study.

In the novels under consideration, formal education is important: English and anthropology in Pym; social sciences, literary study, and secondary school education in Spark; social science and English graduate study in Atwood; and graduate Comparative Literature studies in Irving. Brian Doyle, in English and Englishness, attacks the perception of English studies as "utterly above any history" (58) and the common perception of literary studies as removed from politics and the real world. Although my focus here is on literary studies, and English in particular, I contend that many disciplines similarly present themselves as untainted by ideology, or as "objective." Such a stance has frightening implications, many of which are represented in these novels. Until very recently, for instance, Pymian women were all but invisible in English courses. It's not that they did not exist, but that they were not seen:

> When I think of her, my belly twists a little with contempt. But how do I dare to feel that for her, for that woman so much like me, so much like my mother?
>
> ... she's that blonded made-up matron, a little tipsy with her second manhattan, playing bridge at the country club. In Moslem countries, they make their women wear jubbah and yashmak. This makes them invisible .... Only the forms are different here. You

> don't really see the woman standing at the glove or stocking counter, poking among cereal boxes, loading six steaks into her shopping cart. You see her clothes, her sprayed helmet of hair, and you stop taking her seriously. (French, Women's Room 16)

Before turning to consideration of the novels themselves, I'd like to consider how and why literary studies have often excluded the experiences of such women. Lionel Gossman's 1982 article, "Literature and Education," examines how the teaching of literature has evolved in the past century and a half, noting that the first experimental class in English literature at Princeton was taught in 1846-7 (341). William Stubbs, in 1877, testified before a Royal Commission that he opposed "dilettante teaching, such as the teaching of English literature" in Oxford's historical school. "Another witness would concede only that English literature might be a suitable subject for 'women ... and the second- and third-rate men who [will] become schoolteachers'" (quoted in Palmer, 71, 111). Gossman further notes:

> If it was a coincidence, it was a striking one, that the teaching of English literature was first institutionalized, not at the traditional universities attended by the upper classes, but, as a kind of culture for the common man ... (352)

Might it be possible for feminists to turn this "commonness" to our advantage - as it might be possible to celebrate comedy, not as tragedy's disreputable, less accomplished and clumsier female cousin,[6] but as truly valuable. Or, as Merchant observes, "Comedy has a nobler

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[6] Comedy is generally defined as tragedy's antithesis; often comedy is believed to be everything that tragedy is not. Tragedy, as a form, carries the weight of humankind. It emphasizes the true nobility of human nature; Frye, in "The Argument of Comedy," contrasts the resolution of the typical comedy-- reconciliation with a lover or family-- with tragedy's nobler ritual of struggle, death and rebirth. Tragedy is usually defined as centering on a lone isolated individual (Othello, Lear, Hamlet), while Frye indicates that comedy does not need to rely upon exploring the character of an exceptional or unique central figure. Similarly, Bergson observes that the tragic hero is an individual type, "unique of its kind," while the comic hero is merely a stereotype: "Comedy depicts characters we have already come across and shall meet with again. It takes note of similarities. It aims at

placing types before our eyes" (157).

Bergson further stresses that tragedy is concerned solely with the individual while traditional comedy centers on classes-- satellites of the comic hero, who are all characters of the same type, as demonstrated through titles like "The Merry Wives," "Les Femmes savantes," "Les précieuses ridicules." This is another hallmark of traditional comedy: the propensity to include so many characters that it is impossible (and undesirable) to focus upon the personality of one. Critics have noted the tendency for comedies to include huge ensemble casts: Paul Grawe labels this "Everyman/ societal comedy," which focuses upon the theme that if we all work together we will survive (III). He gives as examples such cases as the television shows "WKRP in Cincinnati," "The Waltons," and "The Mary Tyler Moore Show."

Tragedy, as a form, is viewed with reverence by critics. This can be seen through their evaluations of comic and tragic heroes. Frye delineates the tragic hero as "superior," a political leader who fails, and something of an "overreacher." He further describes the "low mimetic mode" of comedy and realistic fiction, whose hero is "superior neither to other men nor to his environment" (34). More severely, Aristotle describes the comic as ugly, distorted, and defective-- possibly the earliest example of the lamentable undervaluing of comedy. There is an obvious relation here between feminism and "ugly, distorted, defective" comedy. Catharine Clément's declaration that "all laughter is allied with the monstrous" links together feminism, comedy, and revolution as "outside" forces, as not integrated into society. Aristotle's definition of comedy, a backdrop for many critics, sees comedy as a portrait of the frailties of the "lower part of mankind." His definition is very useful in assessing traditional attitudes to comedy throughout history, which designate comedy and tragedy as polar opposites.

Though too strictly "gendering" forms as masculine or feminine is counterproductive, the link between women and comedy should be stressed. Shakespearean comedy, for example, relies heavily upon women as major characters, and Linda Bamber's *Comic Women, Tragic Men* examines this tendency at length. Further,

> Linda Walsh Jenkins suggests the presence of a psychological association between the angst of the estranged tragic hero and male separation from the domestic sphere. She notes that 'tragedies again and again enact the tension between the values of the oikos (home unit) and values of the polis" [11]. Thus, if tragic form is associated with a specifically male psychological experience, might comedy be an affirmation of female experience? (Merrill 272)

Paul Grawe, in his introduction to *Comedy in Space, Time, and the Imagination*, outlines traditional assumptions about comedy: that it is unworthy of serious study; that it is always laughable; that it is about trivial people doing trivial things. Suzanne Langer echoes this last statement in her essay "The Great Dramatic Forms: Comic Rhythm" in saying that comedy is a "trivialization of the human battle"; as such it metaphysical quality than traditional tones and phrases would imply" (i). This study does not attempt to make the study of comedy a "very serious thing" (the title of Nancy Walker's book on funny women), but I do want to attempt to show the anarchic power of comedy. "Pelting anything-- even with laughter-- is not one of the more delicate arts; nor is comedy" (Marshall 168). The laugh of the Medusa is a laugh of refusal - refusal to accept what Leclerc calls "the chains of socialization."

It is a genre by and for the people.[7] Comedy has the potential to tear down the walls of the academy. And feminist comedy makes the

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does not deal with any "great moral struggles or conflict of passions" (251). She observes that comedy in general deals with the "simple" personality, and indicates that it is rare to see comedy produce any serious or long-lasting effects. Frye believes that a sense of reality and identification with the central character is higher in tragedy than in comedy-- in comedy, logic and realism surrender to the requirement of a happy ending. He indicates that the audience bargains with themselves to suspend belief for a few hours in order to enjoy the performance, whereas the audience for a tragic play expect something that is more "like life." Frye sees tragedy as one-directional; every action has irreparable and terrible consequences. In traditional comedy, however, time redeems: "it uncovers and brings to light what is essential to a happy ending" (Anatomy 212). The arbitrariness of time is an important theme in feminist comedy; this will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. However, it's important to note that both Frye and Bergson see (traditional) comedy as circular-- a chain of events that then returns to the starting point. In modern comedies/ fairy tales (particularly those of Irving and Spark) the pattern is linear, not circular. Change occurs, but people do not go back to the starting place. There is no "return to society" of the hero, no happy entry back into the magic circle.

[7] Bakhtin links Rabelaisian comedy to "popular" sources and labels it as more "democratic" than other types of comedy because of its folk aspect: its connection to popular culture, common speech and everyday situations. Comedy is "unofficial," since it demands a temporary or, more radically (as in feminist comedy), permanent suspension of beliefs, values, and tastes. Carnivalesque laughter is the laughter of all people, directed at everyone, ambivalent, and all-inclusive. Jokes, in everyday life, are not viewed as private property or as "authored" by one person or another; like coins, jokes pass from hand to hand and are usually public and democratic in the telling, if not always in their content.

university's unexamined rituals and senseless rules appear bizarre by exploring these rules and rituals in "wild" and marginal ways of writing.

Here I'm dealing with the inherent contradictions I mentioned in the Introduction. I am a member (however marginal and poorly paid) of the academy, presumably aspiring (though at times I'm unsure of this) to be a full-fledged member. Yet I'm mocking the very institution to which I aspire, suggesting, with language that is violent and irreverent by turns, that this academy should not and does not deserve to exist in its present form: rigid, hierarchical, relying upon appeals to "intellectual harlotry" and personal pride.

> I had always believed that the directors of the MLA assumed that God inspired the cover design of their chief publication at the same time that he delivered the Ten Commandments to Moses. I had supposed that carved on tablets of stone tucked away ... at 10 Astor Place in New York was the command "Thou shalt be dull." (Marius 31)

I could rationalize this by saying that I'm doing the "wrong" thing (advocating a Cixousian "shattering of institutions") in the "wrong" (loose, chatty, joky, personal) way for the right reason: a belief in (comic) education as a hope for change. We'll learn more about the structure as we tear it down: how it evolved into the labyrinth that it is, how certain types of experience came to be privileged over others-- and perhaps even why. I can explain this best by another woodworking analogy: say you're remodeling a house. As you take off doors, strip paint, sand floors, rewire-- you begin to deduce a lot about previous tenants, to surmise why they covered a hardwood floor with pink enamel or to be amazed at the skill needed to make handmade nails. It's important to analyze the house's structure, even as you tear the house down to the ground. The Big House-- the academy-- became lopsided, byzantine, with too much attention paid to the details like a Jacuzzi and garburator with scant notice given essentials like kitchens and bathrooms. This parallels exclusion of women's experience-- our knowledge has not been "built in." Audre Lorde has said that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. To carry this analogy even further, we need to find our own method powerful enough to dismantle, tear down, strip away the Big House (the Big White House?). Woolf uses a further building metaphor in *Three Guineas* when she links the behavior patterns established in the "private house" with those of the public world. The two spheres, and their insidious tyrannies, are connected, so "that the tyrannies and servilities of the one are the tyrannies and servilities of the other" (142). The pervasiveness of behavior expected by the private house is still a "going concern" (147). This tool must be accessible to all; ideally, it would not cause headache and thickened air, as Woolf feared. It would be education of the freest, most joyous kind: education through laughter. Because laughter demands simultaneously self-examination and an examination of one's environment, it is education-- learning about one's selves and surroundings[8]-- in its purest form.

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8. Kronenberger, in *The Thread of Laughter*, discusses the self-delusion inherent in traditional comedy, but also points out that much comedy demands self-recognition (197). In a conservative sense, this is true: to answer "What's so funny?" could put you as the butt of the joke. In a more radical sense, society is the butt of the joke:

> Are you a man or a woman? Check the things you find funny:
> ___ Larry, Moe and Curly
> ___ Men dressed as women, but with their unshaven legs showing.
> ___ The disparity between the ideal and the real. (Hollander cartoon in Barreca 2)

The last possibility, as a joke, demands self-examination *and* an

Constance Penley demonstrates strong links between psychoanalysis and feminist teaching, saying that both willfully rely on non-authoritative knowledge: "dreams, slips, jokes, and other revelatory 'errors' of speech and psyche ... feminism looks beyond the 'scientific' certitudes about femininity to what can be learned instead from personal observation and the experience of women" (139). Freud also noted that patients will often signal a new insight - or learning-- by laughing, confirming a spoken insight or diagnosis. In his section on the "Relation of Jokes to Dreams and the Unconscious," Freud traces similarities between jokes and dreams; jokes are formed when "a preconscious thought is given over for a moment to unconscious revision and the outcome is at once grasped by conscious perception" (VI). Related to my attempt to write a "comic" thesis and my instinctual linkage of this style to children's collages (see my Intro.), Freud observes that the comic has infantile roots. Children laugh from pure pleasure, while adults' laughter is only a poor substitute for such joy. This coincides with Bakhtin's analysis of the "deterioration" of comedy's original intentions. (Freud terms "euphoria" the mood of childhood; might this have some links to feminist concepts of jouissance?). To reinforce the links between joking and learning, Freud quotes Fischer's insight that a joke is a judgment that illuminates (9). Though he stresses the "enforcement" power of jokes (see III, particularly on puns), he also insists on the social and psychological importance of jokes. One of the Monty Pythons describes the powers of laughter in Freudian terms:

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examination of society. Many jokes, many comic texts, stress just this disparity. In this sense they are educational, since the comedy makes you see the world from a new angle.

> In psychotherapy ... the moment a patient begins to laugh at himself is the moment he begins to heal-- "because you give them [sic] distance between their behavior and what is essentially themselves .... humor is a kind of touchstone to recognize the excesses of egotism". (John Cleese in Edmonton Journal Dec. 30 1987 B6)

Wendy Wasserstein says of her sense of humor:

> "I know there's a Woody Allen movie, is it Take the Money and Run where his parents are both wearing Groucho glasses? That's very funny. Very funny. You know why? Sometimes funny things are almost like fantasy, and then it comes real." (interview by Cohen, 270)

I want to examine this touchstone as it appears in the comic novel, but first I'd like to set the stage for my feminist comedians.

Literature: from encyclopedia to law book

> "Why are the cultured so limited and finicky?"
> -- Margaret Llewelyn-Davies to Virginia Woolf, 1915

> ... an announcement of a panel discussion at the University, with Hugo flown in to discuss the state of the novel today, or the contemporary short story, or the new nationalism in our literature. Then I think, will people really go, will people who could be swimming or drinking or going for a walk really take themselves out to the campus to find the room and sit in rows listening to those vain quarrelsome men? Bloated, opinionated, untidy men, that is how I see them, cosseted by the academic life, the literary life, by women. People will go to hear them say that such and such a writer is not worth reading any more, and that some writer must be read; to hear them dismiss and glorify and argue and chuckle and shock. (Munro Something, 20)

Gossman notes that the study of literature in the early period (the early nineteenth century) was all-encompassing: "To enter the world of literature was to break out of the blinkered confines of local lore, to acquire a universal-- a classical-- viewpoint, embracing all times and all places" (343). He supports this by examining course content of literature courses in Germany, France, and the U.S. in this period. He traces the process of English studies and its eventual narrowing, observing

> ... in Eichhorn's preface [to The History of Literature from the Origins to the Most Recent Times] no distinction is made, in fact, between literature and Wissenschaft or learning in general. (343)

Gossman then demonstrates how learning-- and the learning of languages and literature-- came in the eighteenth-century college curriculum to be seen as a humanizing/civilizing force, a means of "weaning young men from their natural beastliness" (345) (did young women then remain beastly?). Gossman outlines the three principal ends of a literary education:

The first purpose was to provide a principle of order, in distinguishing between high/lower, human/animal, and, interestingly enough, paternal and maternal, relating to the culture/nature binary discussed in many feminist works (see Joanna Russ and Susan Griffin).[9] This ranking or hierarchy within the academy will be a central concern in this chapter.

Literary education's second purpose was to enable its students to "know and to be able to use certain models of expression and of public and private conduct .... [in] courts, clubs, salons, parliamentary assemblies, courts of law, government offices .... Literary language was the language not only of the learned, but of all who would participate in worldly and public affairs" (345). Gossman stresses the principles of order in the study of classical rhetoric, the emphasis on distinctions between "animal utterances ... peasant or alley dialects" (Rollin quoted in Gossman 345), and "oral, largely peasant culture" (345) and a more "humanized" and orderly way of communicating.[10]

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[9] This raises the question of "mother tongue" and maternal language. Bakhtin uses the "maternal womb" as an image to discuss how carnival has been cut off from its influences (15), but as a comic theorist does not consider specifically the lot of women's role in comedy, or the possible sexual revolution that could be brought about because of it. More to this particular point, the Academy's "weeding out" of the maternal has been well documented elsewhere. Elaine Martin writes: "Students have ambivalent expectations of women faculty: women are supposed to be warm, friendly, supportive, and deferential, yet professionals are supposed to be objective, neutral, authoritative, and able to offer constructive criticism" (486). "Maternal" culture is associated with language, children, the rural and the animal. In these characteristics it seems ideally suited for feminist comedy-- it is set aside or apart from written law, urban structures, and patriarchal hierarchies (Gossman 346). The conflict between "maternal" teaching and "paternal" research will be discussed further.

The third aim of literary education was its role as provider of a language, or tools, to be used in "translating" moral, social, and cultural information.[11]

(I'm here thinking of ex-Yale President and Renaissance scholar turned Baseball Commissioner A. Bartlett Giamatti waxing authoritarian, poetic, and bureaucratic by turns, in announcing Pete Rose's suspension from baseball. Rose, when asked what he thought of Giamatti's remarks, shrugged and said, "I didn't understand a lot of 'em." Or Barbara Dodd, that sad symbol-- not being able to understand the court order blocking an abortion.)[12]

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[10] See Bakhtin on the "language of the marketplace," esp. p. 188.

[11] Brian Doyle observes that, as English became "masculinized" as a study, rules of rhetoric became more and more necessary. The "... academic English scholar was becoming less of a public policy maker in aspiration, and more of an arbiter and custodian both of literary language and literary knowledge" (75). See his English and Englishness (1989) for a very useful explanation of the ways in which ideology shapes English studies.

[12] Barbara Dodd is a hearing-impaired Ontario woman. Her boyfriend brought a court injunction against her to bar her from having an abortion. Dodd, who comprehended spoken and written English at a grade-school level, could not interpret the legal language of the court injunction.

Gossman's analysis well applies to anyone involved in teaching or writing about literature, but particularly to feminists. He demonstrates the split between "literature" and other ways of communicating: literature

> was thus primarily associated with the public life and 'manly' activities ... with government, politics, law, oratory, and literary culture stood apart from and opposed to the domestic, maternal world of oral culture, the world of women, children, and the people, of 'false prejudices' and 'bad education.' (345-6)

The language of the educated is directly opposed to "general" language. Literary education had to stand on guard against reversion to the mother tongue, the people, and other animalistic or savaging forces. Of course, the Romantics attempted to heal the rift between the lower and the upper, to create a whole, a "means of healing wounds" (38). This way of viewing literature, while it attempted to reconcile "masculine" rationality with "feminine" emotion, did narrow the concept and teaching of literature, as Gossman says. Literature was separated from "the changing world of practical knowledge and understanding" (354), and began to assume a role as "a body of sacred texts ... to which values and sentiments seemingly incompatible with practical life in the new industrial society had been evacuated" (355).[13]

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13. Women's exclusion from this body of sacred texts stems from their exclusion from "the public life and 'manly' activities." Women's lives, and writing about women's lives, are often posed using a private, secret, or "maternal" language. (This ideas has lately been explored through popular books such as *"You Just Don't Understand": Men and Women in Conversation*). Women have been traditionally discouraged from "public" performances and spectacle-making. (See Mary Russo's "Female Grotesques.")

Vernacular writing, writing in the language of the peasant or the alley, is often set directly against formal writing. Little writing in the vernacular is canonized, due to its status as "personal" and therefore not reflecting "the enduring world of culture, wisdom, and feeling" (Bakhtin 354), but instead something fleeting and ephemeral. Joanna Russ discusses women's propensity for writing in the vernacular:

Blau DuPlessis writes of the need to find a "new" type of writing that is not exclusionary:

> Interesting that for Woolf it was the form of a journal, and for Pound too it began as a 'rag bag,' a market mess of spilled fish, but became the form of *Analects*, of codes, a great man's laws. *The Cantos*. (265)

Gossman shows the split in English studies between the "practical" and the "sacred" as a fission between the revolutionary and the "bureaucratic servant of official culture" (356); "spinning off" from this idea, I'd extrapolate this to include the split between feminist studies and traditional studies.[14]

"In the vernacular it's also hard to be 'classic,' to be smooth, to be perfect .... It's also hard to read the vernacular as Holy Writ .... minority art, vernacular art, is marginal art. Only on the margins does growth occur" (129). Bakhtin analyzes this further in his chapter on the "language of the marketplace." Though he does not discuss women's language specifically, it seems likely that women made up a good proportion of the marketplace speakers (*i.e.* "fishwife" as a loud, vulgar, abusive and comic speaker of the vernacular). "The use of these colloquialisms created the atmosphere of frankness, inspired certain attitudes, a certain unofficial view of the world" (188). Russ' writers and speakers of the "vernacular," Bakhtin's proponents of the "unofficial" view, and Woolf's "Society of Outsiders" are all marginal or living on the fringes, writing and living in a language not accepted by the academic mainstream. Literature, as practiced by Woolf's angry professors, was seen as a civilizing force-- one which attempted to bring outsiders back into the fold. This has obvious parallels to traditional comedy's function in a conservative society.

14. Bakhtin's description of carnival's liberating effect is useful here: the carnival is not a spectacle to be watched, or a show to be viewed. It is lived in, not looked at (7). There is no distinction made between actors and spectators; action is "in the round," with a blurring of boundaries between art and life. A feminist classroom, like a feminist text, is lived in, not looked at. This crucial link between feminism and comedy is discussed by Aiken *et al.*: "... women traditionally have been perceived by masculinist thinkers as figures of 'disorder,' potential disrupters of masculine boundary systems of all sorts, all the more fearsome because situated within the very heart of 'civilization.'" They quote Carole Pateman's 1980 article, "The Disorder of Women: Women, Love, and the Sense of Justice." Also cited is Natalie Zemon Davis' "Women on Top," which Judy Little uses fairly extensively to describe feminist/revolutionary comedy in *Comedy and the Woman Writer*. The comic principle of inversion that Zemon Davis describes is, of course, a useful tool in feminist teaching. Women's, and comedy's,

Early English studies which emphasized writing and public speaking, a way of "learning how to produce fine essays and speeches oneself," gradually came to be an activity of appreciation: "The reader's relation to books was thus no longer in the first instance that of a potential writer, a producer, an equal; it was that, at best, of an adept or worshiper, at worst, of a consumer" (Gossman 355). Such a split between practical communication and art appreciation could explain the blue-collar tint to Communciations and Journalism schools (which have at their hearts speaking and writing) and English literature's "ivory tower" reputation. Some of my journalism major friends acted betrayed when I switched majors to English lit., feeling I'd aligned myself with "comma-counting." The potentially revolutionary, unofficial and personal style of many non-canonical feminist works until very recently assured their exclusion from "pure" literary courses.

> However much canonical works may be seen to 'question' secular vanities such as wealth, social position, and political power, 'remind' their readers of more elevated values and virtues, and oblige them to 'confront' such hard truths and harsh realities as their own mortality and the hidden griefs of an obscure people, they would not be found to please long and well if they were seen to undercut establishment interests radically or to subvert the ideologies that support them effectively. (Herrnstein Smith 30)

Gossman believes that making the study of literature a specialization causes it to lose its claim to being "unifier and restorer of culture" (358).[15] The critics of such a bureaucratic culture make strange

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status as marginal, "wild," and disruptive is a key to "reconstructing the academy."

[15] One of Doyle's primary points is the appropriation of literature by the New Right. Propaganda is nothing new, but the use of English in order to propagate an "enterprise culture" is troubling indeed. "Within the framework of 'enterprise' cultural policy it is the clear purpose of education to reconstruct consciousness of self as prospective worker for the national and international capitalist economy and to sustain conservative patriarchal family life, and indeed to resign the

bedfellows: when I criticize overspecialization in education, I'm uncomfortably aware of sounding like a back-to-basics Great Books advocate. Our reasons for wanting change, however, are wildly different. They envision a return to the days when all "freshman" classes read the same literature classics, when college students wished to be well rounded. I'm arguing for well-roundedness too, but I'd like my circle to be a sphere- three-dimensional-- instead of a flat, drawn circle. (I tried using the metaphor of a full circle and a piece of a circle, but since I never took geometry, I don't know what that's called. Institutional sexism again?)

Gossman's analysis includes the elevation of literary culture over the culture of the people-- women and children being on the lowest rungs. Again, a direct link between the "literature of the people," comedy, and women comes to mind. All are on the margins, associated with children and the lower classes, vulgarity, sexuality, wildness, and things that "polite" people look down upon. Much comedy, like "the literature of the people," is not thought to be worthy of teaching because it does not elevate our thoughts. Comedy's "vulgarity," its roots in folk culture, link it with contemporary popular culture, partly because of both cultures' opposition to the "official." Popular comedy, like folk literature, is not as commonly taught as tragedy, possibly because comedy has a reputation as mere entertainment and not instruction. Such literary comedies as those of Shakespeare, Molière,

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'unenterprising' to worklessness" (137-8). The recent rise in Great Books advocacy and cultural literacy movements seem to back this up, as do the many recent articles on "political correctness." In a popular culture context, this might be seen as equivalent to Madison Avenue taking over rap music. Rap's status as urban protest music seems endangered by its "sellout" to Nike, McDonald's, etc.

or Austen are widely taught, but often as less serious, less instructive, and therefore less valuable than tragedy. Comedy, as Merchant observes, is very often set up as tragedy's antithesis. Further, Frye divides comedy into "high" (Aristophanes, the catharsis of sympathy and ridicule) and "low" (picaresque comedy, which often involves a social promotion) (Anatomy 43), labels that might well discourage intensive study of the latter. Paul Grawe, in Comedy in Space, Time, and the Imagination, attacks the presupposition of Aristotle and others that comedy is trivial and about low characters, and that a comedy's success depends on how well it functions as an "opiate," not on its intrinsic message. Even most twentieth century novel courses tend to focus on tragic constructions (The Great Gatsby, The Grapes of Wrath, war novels like All Quiet on the Western Front, Faulkner's and Hemingway's novels of alienation). There may be a "token" comic novel, but these rarely dominate a course. Doyle describes English studies as an institutional set of academic practices that work to process, evaluate, and transmit texts believed to have "cultural value" (8). Later, he describes academia's disdain for the vernacular and vulgar (74), labels which could apply to much twentieth-century comedy (particularly revolutionary and/or feminist comedy).

Woolf's revolutionary feminism, which is often couched in terms of comedy, drags us down in to the practical, bodily, everyday language of mothers, children, the "lower" (as Blau DuPlessis calls it, "the first Tampax in world literature" [266]).[16] Both comedy and feminism make us

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[16] Russ, in her chapter on "Aesthetics," documents the hierarchies of literary art. She quotes Valerie Jaudon and Joyce Kozloff:

> The prejudice against the decorative has a long art history and

believe that we can be equal-- by mocking norms, the behavior of sensible people, the idea of being in control at all times. The literature of the people, including comedy and feminism, threatens the status quo.

But, you say, women and children outnumber white orthodoxly educated men, so how is literary culture defined and carried forth? In the academy, it is largely through the tenet of "publish or perish." The academization (there MUST be a better word) of literary culture is mercilessly attacked in ProfScam: research must be published,

> But not in something as plebeian as The Atlantic Monthly or Harper's, for that would entail no prepublication approval by peers and would be considered catering to popular (i.e. nonacademic) taste. ... for obscurity is vital. (115)

Sykes deliberately and provocatively overstates his case, but his chapter, "The Weird World of Academic Journals," makes me uneasy. For whom DO we write endless articles, analyses, reviews? If knowledge is an attempt to broaden and expand, why all the "comma-counting"? It seems that, as Gossman observes, folk culture has left its broad roots and become accessible only to an elite. Women and comedy have been left outside the magic circle.[17]

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is based on hierarchies: fine art above decorative art, Western art above non-Western art, men's art above women's art ... "high art" [means] man, mankind, the individual man, individuality, humans, humanity, the human figure, humanism, civilization, culture, the Greeks, the Romans, the English, Christianity, spiritual transcendence, religion, nature, true form, science, logic, creativity, action, war, virility, violence, brutality, dynamism, power, and greatness.

In the same texts other words are used repeatedly in connection with ... "low art": Africans, Orientals, Persians, Slovaks, peasants, the lower classes, women, children, savages, pagans, sensuality, pleasure, decadence, chaos, anarchy, impotence, exotica, eroticism, artifice, tattoos, cosmetics, ornament, decoration, carpets, weaving, patterns, domesticity, wallpaper, fabrics, and furniture. (114-15)

Atwood, Spark, Pym and Irving all take on the unspoken assumption that obscurity and difficulty are preferable to accessibility. Pym's Caro, a "graduate wife," writes, "In the academic world what you published and where was about the most important thing there was" (153). She comments about her sociologist husband:

> ... he was suspicious of Coco, particularly in the academic sense. What exactly did the research fellow in Caribbean Studies do, apart from hobnobbing with the West Indian Factory workers and bus drivers in a pub in the town? Ought he not to have published, or be in the act of getting published, or even "preparing for publication"-- that vague, useful phrase-- some monograph, report or article on some aspect of his work? (32)

The importance of protocol in academia cannot be overestimated. The graduate program is often viewed as an opportunity to initiate acolytes (if that isn't a mixed metaphor) into the delights of academic life. A

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17. Doyle, similarly troubled, advocates "new forms" of addressing class, gender, ethnic, and community-based concerns in literature. Blau DuPlessis says of her own writing, "The struggle with cultural hegemony, and the dilemmas of that struggle, are articulated in a voice that does not seek authority of tone or stasis of position but rather seeks to express the struggle in which it is immersed" (248). The expression of this struggle, and the study of it, leads to dissension and to pluralism, but also to a broadening of possibilities. Gossman, at the end of his analysis, states that the strength of literary education now is its tension; its ability to accommodate various theories and practices and its struggle against being essentialized. His description of literary studies' positive qualities has some striking parallels to Little's ideas on feminist comedy: "it continues to resist routinization ...; precisely because it fails to provide positive doctrines and lessons but, on the contrary, continually opens up abysses before us and confronts us with uncertainty, precisely because, in short, it is the place where we encounter not presence ... but absence, not security, but insecurity" (363).

Comedy, by virtue of its "vulgar" past, seems ideally suited for feminist study, even feminist (re-) appropriation. To lower the abstract to the earthy through laughter is tc storm the ivory tower and give it back to the people who built it. Comic folk literature, in Rabelais' time, advocated a holiday from societal restraint-- as a brief release from a rigidly structured environment. But as Mary Russo and others have observed, such temporary license may in fact strengthen the status quo, since someone must always be "on top." Feminist comedy is more truly revolutionary, since it advocates permanent suspension of deeply ingrained and held values.

whole new lifestyle and language must be learned. In "English and Englishness," Showalter observes (in a rather horrified tone):

> Many students are left to learn the ways of the profession for themselves. Values, attitudes, customs-- a whole culture must be learned by osmosis, observation, and trial and error. Some Ph.D candidates absorb this professional ethos with little apparent effort; others do not. (v)

Titles and protocol: their stiffness, their distancing, their use to label and to narrow are a part of this love for pigeonholing:

> "Miss, ah, Missus Nyland?"
> "Yes," I say, not wanting to choose between them. (Hite 3)

(Putting me in mind of a graduate class where the prof called everyone by Mr., Mrs., or Miss, followed by last name. Trembling with audacity, I said I preferred Ms. "It's an abomination," he replied. Attempting to lighten the ugly atmosphere [how dare she? breathed in the aisles] I joked that that was the reason I was getting a doctorate-- so no one would have to worry about what to call me. Humiliatingly, he called me "the future Dr. Jones" the rest of the year.)

> **"Miss" may carry with it the swish of petticoats, the savour of scent or other odour perceptible to the nose on the further side of the petition and obnoxious to it. ... As for "Mrs," it is a contaminated word; an obscene word. The less said about that word the better.** (3G 59-60)

> **Last spring I had dinner with a Korean mathematics professor in Paris. When she went home to the country of her birth, there was no word in the language to accommodate a woman Ph.D. They didn't know how to address her. Her colleagues and students had only words to name her as her husband's wife or as "Eugene's mother" .** (Marcus 305)

But, you say, isn't this a rather silly incident to bring up? Leaving aside the value of "silly" for a bit-- no. A great deal of time and energy goes into just such matters of academic protocol. Pym lampoons the delicate (male) ego of a journal editor in An Academic Question:

> "How will you address him-- I mean, what do you call him? Dear Rollo? or Dear Professor Gaunt?"
>
> Alan frowned and did not answer, appearing absorbed by the niceties of the problem. 'Dear Sir' was out of the question, for Rollo Gaunt was no stranger to him. .... Apparently nobody ever used his full name-- Roland-- and the old-fashioned 'My dear Gaunt' form of address was suitable only for an older and perhaps more eminent scholar addressing a younger .... 'Dear Professor Gaunt' was possible, but that might give the impression that Alan was thinking too little of himself, was being unnecessarily humble. .... It seemed to be a matter of some delicacy. (45)

"Give me a girl at an impressionable age": childhood education

In writing about education, maybe, as the Red Queen told Alice, it is best to begin at the beginning and go all the way through to the end. Formal education, particularly childhood education, comes up in several of my texts, most memorably in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie and Lady Oracle. Spark, Atwood, Irving and Pym all comically question "normal" education, which is seen by more sentimental authors as a civilizing, socially mobilizing force. My authors, however, expose the tendency of education to choke off life at every point, to stifle real creativity, energy and laughter (reminding me of an incident in second grade. My friend Christopher told me a hilarious joke-- which I've forgotten, but second-grade humor runs to the burp/fart variety-- and I laughed. Out loud. And couldn't stop. Chris laughed too, but I was the one who had to stay after school, in tears, and write lines: "I WILL NOT ACT SILLY IN SCHOOL." So much for "educating the whole child").

Atwood, in Lady Oracle, uses Joan's school experience to show how Joan later became an "escape artist," fond of throwing away and retrieving identities.

> At Miss Flegg's you were supposed to try to be better than everyone else, but at Brownies you were supposed to try to be the same, and I was beginning to find this idea quite attractive. (50)

Virginia Woolf, for one, recognized full well the power wielded by seemingly innocent social organizations like Brownies and Boy Scouts: that they molded this preference for conformity, stifled individuality, and fostered militarism.[18] (This section of Three Guineas is one that makes many people acutely uncomfortable, most likely because so many of us have been enrolled in such groups, and because Woolf seems uncharacteristically grim and humorless when tackling them. The way the school system encourages this conformity over more troublesome forms of expression can be easily illustrated: at most schools, the wearing of Brownie or Camp Fire Girls uniforms is tolerated or even encouraged. But at many schools, "rebellious" clothing, such as Bart Simpson T-shirts, rat-tails or "skater" clothing, is banned.)

Joan's determination to fit in makes her a "kindly aunt and wisewoman" to the more glamorous girls in high school. She is even shaped like a duenna; because she is fat, she's not believed to have feelings (at school, she's damned as a girl with "terrific personality"-- the kiss of death at Braeside High). Joan knows that in her heart she's a duplicitous monster, but the fat cheerful body is all anyone sees.

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[18] As I write, a 9-year-old Miami girl is suing the Boy Scouts of America for sex discrimination, saying that her Girl Scout troop was "boring" and that "I don't want to be left out like I always am" (The Daily Jeffersonian [Cambridge, Ohio] June 22, 1991). The national spokesman for BSA said the program "was designed with the specific needs of boys in mind. We know from research and experience that the psychological needs of the boys ... are very different from those of young girls" (ellipses in orig.). William Raspberry, in a syndicated column, says that if Margo were his daughter "... I'd try to convince her that gender separation-- unlike racial segregation-- doesn't necessarily imply inferiority or superiority" (Columbus [Ohio] Dispatch, June 23, 1991). BSA has recently been legally challenged by an 8-year-old, barred entrance because he said he did not believe in God, by two boys who refused to say "God" in the Cub Scout Promise (both expelled from their pack), and by a homosexual man who wanted to be a scoutmaster. Althusser's ISAs seem to be at work here.

> **Miss Edmonton contest manager defending the diversity of "his" contestants: "We even have a chubby girl entered this year. Can you imagine her in the swimsuit competition?".** (local television, June 1989)

It is the social and not the academic side of school that these authors portray most keenly.[19] Being called a dog or dropping a cafeteria tray are memories sharp and hurting in every detail; the plot of Great Expectations or the anatomy of a frog is lost in muck.

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[19] As institutions, schools meet Althusser's definition of an ideological state apparatus (ISA). When he describes how the school and the church "teach mastery of [their] practice[s]" (128), it is as much the social behavior demanded by these institutions as the taking in of data that he analyzes. His examination of the church as an ISA and of the autonomous self as an ISA will be discussed in Chapters Two and Three respectively. However, Althusser distinguishes between "repressive state apparatuses" which function through straightforward violence (police, courts, prison, army) and those which reinforce state apparatuses through ideology (schools, churches) and work secondarily through violence (131-39). He contends that competent labor power is ensured through appealing to one's desire to acquire scientific knowledge or "literary culture," and that through such education, one learns the "ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression" (127). Schools aim at such reproduction through various methods (one of which, as I've mentioned, is mockery); similarly, disciplines like English studies or history likewise represent themselves as untainted by ideology, though they are subject to the same political constraints as the institutions that house them.

> Inevitably we look upon society, so kind to you, so harsh to us, as an ill-fitting form that distorts the truth; deforms the mind; fetters the will. Inevitably we look upon societies as conspiracies that sink the private brother, whom many of us have reason to respect, and inflate in his head a monstrous male, loud of voice, hard of fist, childishly intent upon scoring the floor of the earth with chalk marks, within whose mystic boundaries human beings are penned, rigidly, separately, artificially ... (3G 105)

> She believed the order of things at school to be unchangeable, the rules there different from any that Flo would understand, the savagery incalculable. Justice and cleanliness she saw now as innocent notions out of a primitive period of her life. She was building up the first store of things she could never tell. (Munro 25)

Irving's characters, too, remember the social savagery of school with peculiar clarity. At the Dairy School, a winning football team is so highly emphasized that players are "bought" for Coach Bob. This is not a gesture for a beloved coach, but a bid to attract more alumni money. As in many high schools, the football players are idolized, particularly Chipper Dove, a

> cruel, angular boy from one of the posher Boston suburban schools.
> "He's a natural leader, that Chipper Dove," Coach Bob said.
> He's a natural commander of someone's secret police, I thought.
> (HNH 80)

Such is Chipper Dove's ability to inspire fear, both on and off the football field, that he has the Dairy backfield and a lineman or two constantly around him. The group "menaced the campus that year like a horde" (80), terrorizing outsiders, including the first girls to be admitted to the school, black students, and "queers." Because they are endowed with power (in the form of money, physical prowess and adoration from some of Dairy's girls), they behave as they like. Schools are often just microcosms of society at large, and the Dairy School is no different. One of the few black football players, lineman Junior Jones, "the main reason Chipper Dove never even fell down" (83) is in practical terms excluded from other areas of school life. The imported black students, all athletes, live on the top floor of one dorm:

> "Like the fucking birdies in the nests in the tippy-tops of the trees, man," said Harold Swallow. "That's where the black people get put at this shit-ass school."
> The fifth floor of the dorm was dark and hot. "Heat rises, don't you know?" said Harold Swallow. "Welcome to the fuckin'

> jungle." (111)

The black students form "The Black Arm of the Law," a secret police at Dairy that operates with the knowledge and cooperation of the Dean of Students. Though it is highly effective, and is presented by Irving as cartoonishly violent ("...just as the Dean of Women emerged from the bathroom, she saw the black athletes swaying in the doorway, like a choral society from an African country, and she screamed again; she shut herself back in the bathroom" [118]), it is another instance of the minority doing dirty work for the majority. Because the Dean lacks the courage or the desire to discipline the football players (perhaps because punishing white prep school athletes would be too much like punishing himself), he encourages the black students to act as violent vigilantes. The fact that he warns Junior Jones to bring the rapists to him "gently" points out his racist fear of the physically powerful "black savage." Just as black students function as "The Black Arm of the Law" (enforcement, or violence, is black; law and order white), so do they on the football field. (A side note: the National Football League recently premiered a black starting quarterback. Few were brave enough to say that black athletes had been unoffically barred from a "thinking" position. In baseball, catchers are rarely black; white pitchers don't like taking orders from black catchers, apparently.)

Chipper Dove and his stooges rule Dairy School in many ways, but the most blatant way is through physical violence: "That backfield was always beating up on someone" (84). Franny and John are walking home from school one day when they find out that the backfield is beating up their brother Frank:

> Frank was wearing his band uniform. They had stripped the shit-brown pants (with the death-gray stripe down the leg) clean off him. Frank's underwear was yanked down to his ankles .... "Come on, hump it!" said Chipper Dove to Frank. He pushed down on Frank's ass and drove him deep into the mud puddle again. The football cleats left little indentations on Frank's ass. (85)

Chipper Dove tells Franny and John they're doing this because "Your brother likes boys" (85). Since Dove is at the top of the school hierarchy, he and his cronies enforce their own standards of conformity; Frank, as a homosexual; Junior Jones, as a black; and Franny, as a female, do not fit them, and so are publicly humiliated. This scene of Frank's humiliation, and Franny's gang rape, is so reminiscent of schoolyard "justice" that it's painful to read.

Laughter does play a positive role in the end of this scene. Franny entices away Chipper Dove; Frank then smashes Dove with his school band cymbals. Then "Frank continued to smash his cymbals together-- as if this were a ritual dance that our family always practiced prior to slaughtering an enemy." As they walk home,

> "I'm sorry," [Frank] told us. And when we were nearer home, he said, "Thank you."
> "Thank you, too," Franny said. "Both of you," she said, squeezing my arm.
> "I really am queer, you know," Frank mumbled.
> "I guess I knew," Franny said.
> "It's okay, Frank," I said, because what else could a brother say?
> "I was thinking of a way to tell you," Frank said.
> And Franny said, "This was a quaint way."
> Even Frank laughed. (89)

When Franny is raped by the same teenaged boys, Junior Jones' secret police track down two of them, but Chipper Dove escapes by hiding in the room of a "doting cheerleader" (120). This is a potent example of how the sports-school hierarchy works to protect its own. Besides expulsion, nothing happens to the rapists:

> It was an incident that was hushed up in the best private school tradition; it was remarkable, really, how a school as unsophisticated as the Dairy School could at times imitate exactly the decorum of silence in dealing with distasteful matters that the more sophisticated schools had learned like a science. (121)

The rapists' expulsion, however, distresses the trustees, who wished the incident suppressed until after the big football game with Exeter. (I hear similar ugly rumors in the small private college where I now teach: a woman sexually assaulted at a fraternity party, hazing ceremonies that involve confronting, in front of an audience, women who "sleep around"; frat members stripping naked and having a "hate [women] ceremony" on the quadrangle. If the local police are phoned about college students involved in off-campus crime, Campus Security and the Dean of Students investigate. Althusser's educational ISA is here enforced with the law and the courts, as well as "tradition.")

Althusser sees professional sport as an ideological state apparatus (ISA), one which does the work of reproducing ideology. Sports at the school and college levels also preach the gospel of traditional values: self-sacrifice, exaltation of physical strength, strict obedience to the leader.

(School sports-- certainly an area that increased my feeble teenage interest in the ERA and feminism, and one that I see now as a powerful ISA-- one that employs repression (of emotion) and violence (physical) to reproduce its culture. I didn't really think I was much different from a boy until I wanted to play baseball. No, the Rec Department said, no girls' teams. But there are other things she can do: baton twirling, modern dance. And Irving's Franny, for instance, is in that most "feminine" of sports: cheerleading. That is, until she gets involved in an altercation with Chipper Dove's human shield, Mindy

Mitchell:

> "Cock tease," Mindy Mitchell called my sister.
> "Dumb cunt," Franny said, and whacked Mindy with her cheerleader's megaphone. It was made of cardboard, and it looked like a large shit-brown ice cream cone with a death-grey D for Dairy printed on it. "D is for Death," Franny always said.
> "Smack in the boobs," another cheerleader told me. "Franny hit Mindy Mitchell with the megaphone smack in the boobs." (130)

Not to be too solemn about this, but it seems that Franny does to Mindy Mitchell what she previously did to Chipper Dove: what we used to call "Hit 'em where it counts." She turns the tools of the cheerleading trade into a weapon.)

> Men should get out and play, and women should stand on the sidelines, rooting for them, looking as much like Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders as possible. In this regard, Texas women have not changed an iota, as near as I can tell, feminist movement or no feminist movement. The hopelessly intense, heartbreaking longing with which almost every Texas girl still wants to be a cheerleader can be seen in every junior high, every high school all over this state. (Ivins, 82-3)

Why are cheerleaders idolized, emulated, and adored in school? Better yet, why are they even allowed? At my high school the cheerleaders would decorate the lockers of the team, bake cookies for them, and generally make sure they did M.H.S. proud. Lest you think I am using this thesis as a vehicle for old sour grapes (well, maybe I am; I was disgusted when my best friend dumped me to work on her splits and cultivate the right crowd), I do think it's astounding that schools sanction such a blatant message. Eleanor Nyland, the heroine of Class Porn, is a sessional lecturer at a Middle America college. She is the sole female member on a committee to "rethink Basic English":

> **He squints at me. "You're going to be a definite asset to our team," he says. "That's exactly what Ralph said."**
> **"Oh, that was nice of him," I say, my mother's training asserting itself. I'm thinking that if they're a team I'm their cheerleader. It's the only possible role they could have for me. My mother would be so gratified if I could finally be a**

cheerleader. (Hite, 144-5)[20]

Cheerleading, and its place in school, is a trumpet call to girls: be a spectator, stay on the sidelines, scream approval for men being active while you remain passive, and better yet, wear skimpy clothes while you do this. (A French friend read Hotel New Hampshire, but wasn't sure exactly what Franny WAS-- there is no word in French for "cheerleader," apparently. "A chorus girl?" Martine asked me. "Close enough," I said.) Cheerleading is the most blatant example of sexism in school, and it is an activity so archaic that it almost begs to be lampooned. (When Joan Delacourt is inventing an acceptably misguided past to present to her husband, she tells him she was a cheerleader and runner-up Prom Queen.) But institutional attitudes to women and girls are usually more subtle and hence, more dangerous. I want to examine some of these deeply ingrained ideas in the next section.

Propaganda in the classroom

Both Atwood's The Handmaid's Tale (HT) and Spark's The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (JB) are, of course, extremely political and very funny novels. There are some other astonishing parallels between these two tales-- the Utopian vision of the novels' ruling powers; the idea of women as enforcers; the relegation of individuals to roles; and comic attacks on the education of the female.

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[20] Family approval and school approval are often indistinguishable (parental pride in good report cards, school praise for appropriate behavior learned at home). Both are teaching institutions. Althusser describes the "school-family" coupling as a relatively recent ideological apparatus, replacing the "church-family" couple (146). Schools, like churches, like universities, are structured like the family: male at the top, with a descending hierarchy according to gender, age, and so on. Woolf pins down the link between education and family when in Three Guineas she writes that "most of [the men] kept in step, walked according to rule, and by hook or by crook made enough to keep the family house ... supplied with beef and mutton for all, and with education for Arthur" (61).

Firstly, the idea of a Utopia is guiding principle in both novels: in each, a ruler arbitrarily decides on the "common good" and acts according to this decision. The education of the future Handmaids at the Rachel and Leah Center is the Gileadean view of "freedom from" any and all responsibility and, hence, control. As Eric Rabkin's analysis of dystopia, No Place Else, shows, there is a painfully fine line between Dystopia and Utopia. Education, and who is allowed what kind of education, is one example of this small difference. Plato's Republic, a Utopia, has as "cornerstone ... that each person is educated to fulfill the one job for which he is best qualified by native talent, and educated to believe that his functioning in society must be as a doer of that job" (Rabkin 6). The Red Centers, the Angel training camps, and the Birthmobiles come to mind, as does Commander Judd's comment, "Our big mistake was teaching [women] to read" (289, HT). Offred realizes that in Gilead, knowledge brings power. Both are illicit. "[I] finger the letters. The feeling is voluptuous. This is freedom," she says of the first Scrabble game (131). The ability to use language is synonymous with power; to disrupt patriarchal language by playing with it, as Offred does (making up words), or as her predecessor does (the pig Latin inscription in the closet) is to seize power-- not necessarily to wield it in a serious way, but to have fun with it. Offred keeps secret all of her thoughts and interpretations because she realizes the danger of such knowledge. Overt use of power, or responsibility (choosing) is not allowed to "doers" of her job: "from each according to her ability, to each according to his needs," as the Aunts say. For these reasons, we have Handmaids, Jezebels, Wives, Marthas, Aunts, and Econowives, as well as Eyes, Commanders, Angels and Guardians.

Similarly, in Brodie, each girl is famous for something, in keeping with her appearance or her abilities (as perceived by Jean Brodie): Mary is the scapegoat, Rose is the lover, Eunice the comedian, Monica the mathematician, Jenny the beauty, Sandy the observer. Jean Brodie's adaptation of the Jesuit formula, "Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life," curls around and through the novel. None of her girls are able to escape fully the ironclad roles that were impressed upon them. Sandy, as Sister Helena of the Transfiguration, admits Miss Brodie's importance: when a visitor points out that "the influences of one's teens are very important," Sandy replies, "even if they provide something to react against" (34-5). In the same way, I think, most feminists became political because of just such negative influences: many react against, not act in accordance with, traditional structures and expectations. Miss Brodie maps out paths for her "set," and is hurt and astounded when some of the girls violate her expectations: when Eunice prefers a Modern education over the Classical, when Sandy and not Rose has an affair with the art teacher.[21]

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[21] Penley outlines the importance of such transference for the teacher: "In addition to the fact that education cannot take place without transference, the teacher has another reason for not wanting to give up this identificatory power over the students, and that is his or her own narcissistic satisfaction in seeing the students generally coming to want what he or she wants 'for' them" (132). The question of power and authority in the classroom is a troubling one for feminist teachers and researchers. Spark, in The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, and Atwood, in Cat's Eye, examine girls' schools and girls' segregation at schools. Miss Brodie and several of Elaine's teachers, as minor powers in the machine of patriarchal education, duplicate the techniques used in the larger world, ruling through withdrawal of affection, ridicule, and outright fear. See Minnich and O'Barr, eds., Reconstructing the Academy; Thompson and Wilcox, eds., Teaching women.

Like many "benevolent" dictators, Miss Brodie's principles change considerably in the course of her reign-- Spark writes that Miss Brodie was one "whose nature was growing under their eyes, as the girls themselves were under formation. It extended, this prime of Miss Brodie's, still in the making when the girls were well on in their teens. And the principles governing the end of her prime would have astonished herself at the beginning of it" (44).

The Commander, though not so singularly powerful as Jean Brodie, undergoes the same inconsistency of ideology: we can assume that he was originally a true believer in the Gileadean cause, especially through his remarks to Offred in unguarded moments ("[Women] were always complaining. Problems this, problems that .... This way they all get a man, nobody's left out .... they got no respect as mothers .... This way they're fulfilled, they can fulfill their biological destinies in peace" [206]). Later, however, he goes from seeing WOMEN as a whining mass of baby makers to seeing them as people worth breaking rules for. Like Miss Brodie, whose nature works her toward extremities, the Commander is someone to react against. Both have theories that function well in the abstract but have fatal flaws in reality: Sandy realizes that

> this was not all theory and a kind of Brodie game, in the way that so much of life was unreal talk and game-planning, like the prospects of a war .... But this was not theory; Miss Brodie meant it. (119)

Miss Brodie, though she is disdainful of the team spirit, takes pride in making her girls "of my stamp and cut"; much like the Aunts, who encourage the Handmaids-in-training to think of themselves as empty vessels to be filled up with details of the new regime, Miss Brodie relishes the thought that Teddy Lloyd endlessly replicates her image on canvas. (It brings to mind the Aunt who likes the Christmas-card pose, the "aesthetics of the thing" of rows of Handmaids kneeling at prayers.)

In both novels, loyalty to a system-- or a person representing a system-- is a difficult ethical question. (As the Beach Boys would say, "Be true to your school/ Just like you would to your girl.") Loyalty is a difficult subject for many feminists to tackle. Woolf's prescription for "poverty, chastity, derision and freedom from unreal loyalties" as a way of ostensibly preventing war but in practice ending hierarchy and violence, is utopian in tone. Her vision of the Outsiders' Society is idealistic and energetic. She writes of the dream of making "unity out of multiplicity" as "the dream that has haunted the human mind since the beginning of time" (143).[22]

When Monica talks to Sandy abut betraying Miss Brodie, Sandy says that loyalty is due someone "only to a point." Alex Hamilton writes of an interview with Muriel Spark:

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[22] Can feminist comedy be utopian? Based on my knowledge of such feminist utopian writings as Les Guérillères, Orlando, and "The Laugh of the Medusa," I think that to postulate a world which is different, better, egalitarian and free is inevitably to imply critique of the existing world. To ask "what if?" is to state that the possibility exists but has not yet occurred. But when critiquing an institution, one should have an alternative in mind; to "blow up the 'truth' with laughter" suggests the probability of other multiple truths elsewhere. Though I cannot explore this question fully here, utopian feminist comedy does open up some wonderful possibilities. Orlando's solution seems to be a refusal of definition, existing as a "moving target," much as Sissy Hankshaw and some of the Rubber Rose Ranch cowgirls decide to do at the end of Even Cowgirls Get the Blues. The philosophy of keeping on the move-- here, physically-- is represented by the whooping cranes, which refuse to return to their old habitat and instead travel the globe. Their message is carried "from the wild to the wild-no-more" (409). Though the refusal to grow up and settle down is "childish" to many, Bakhtin, for one, disagrees that we should strive to be finished and complete. He argues instead that the process (or the journey), not the goal, is important. Feminist writers often see "opening the question" to debate as more difficult, and more enjoyable, than answering it.

> She herself is against family loyalties being imposed, or friendship loyalties. She feels very strongly about this. It's demanding too much of any human to ask them to be loyal to a party, to a system or a person for the whole of their life. To say 'You owe me loyalty' is a terrible thing. (quoted in Whittaker 110)

Woolf's "freedom from unreal loyalties" lurks in the background of HT's final scene: Serena Joy has found out the Commander's illicit sex with Offred.

> No doubt they've been having a fight, about me; no doubt she's been giving him hell. I still have it in me to feel sorry for him. Moira is right, I am a wimp. .... What have I been saying, and to whom, and which one of his enemies has found out? ... There have already been purges among them, there will be more. Serena Joy goes white. "Bitch," she says. "After all he did for you." (276)

As the film version of The Handmaid's Tale makes clear, Offred's reluctant loyalty to (or sympathy for) Serena Joy is strongest when they are both trapped in the Ceremony. Offred feels an "unreal loyalty" to the Commander, despite his power over her. Atwood and Spark both discuss the danger inherent in a system based on one person's vision, and the consequences of demands for loyalty to the person and the vision. Atwood has said

> In [Morris' News from Nowhere] everybody is weaving fabrics and carving ornamental chairs, having a good time, and they all decide things in a very democratic way. But any attempt to implement Morris' utopia would impose a lot of things on a lot of people ... What do you do then? What do you do if somebody doesn't buy your ideal society? You end up shooting people. What kind of an ideal is that? (Sandler, 27)

Atwood believes The Handmaid's Tale is a "look at historical patterning, the way things happen," which closely allies it with Alan Bold's description of Brodie as a political fairy tale. Spark parallels the rise of Miss Brodie's "personal fascisti" with the rise of Mussolini and Hitler: all three leaders selected a crème de la crème; all chose a select few in whom to confide their troubles; and all employed a ruling hierarchy of ideas; the power structure in Gilead is similarly constructed. In both cases school is an enforcer, an agent of propaganda.

> They also serve who only stand and wait, said Aunt Lydia. She made us memorize it. She also said, Not all of you will make it through. Some of you will fall on dry ground or thorns. Some of you are shallow-rooted (HT 18).

> "Yes," said Miss Brodie,"I have my eye upon you, Sandy. I observe a frivolous nature. I fear you will never belong to life's elite or, as one might say, the creme de la creme." (23)

In both, the elite group is indoctrinated with the personal prejudices of its leader; as Bold observes, assertions, not analysis, are part of such an education. Further, the assertions are made by those who view themselves as part of the elect, those who have "elected themselves to grace," as Spark would say.

> "Who is the greatest Italian painter?"
> "Leonardo da Vinci, Miss Brodie."
> "That is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favourite."
> (11)

> *From each*, says the slogan, *according to her ability; to each according to his needs*. We recited that, three times, after dessert. It was from the Bible, or so they said. St. Paul again, in Acts. (*HT* 111)

Offred's description of Gyn Ed is hilarious and chilling at the same time: they sit in the Domestic Science room, watching old porno movies (Aunt Lydia: "That was what they thought of women, then" [112]), or documentaries, with accompanying propaganda, about Unwomen, pro-choice supporters or Take Back the Night marches. How different is Gyn Ed from what is normally taught in high school, the "Marriage and the Family" courses most women have taken at one time or another? Or the education dished out at the Marcia Blaine School, where the Brodie set is formed? The romanticism, and lack of practical application, of much modern education is something I'll return to with more detail later. But Miss

Brodie has a great fondness for telling romantic stories of "great lovers" acting without consequences (herself usually being the understood object of such devotion); at the Red Center the "angel in the house," woman's duty to man, and a certain preoccupation with Nature are central. Here Nature dictates the destiny of individuals: it is "natural" for fecund women to become Handmaids. It is "natural," in our own time, for women to be denied entry to military schools because they "lack the 'ferocity' to do well there," as a Harvard sociologist said (Columbus [Ohio] Dispatch June 21, 1991). Woolf's Angel in the House lives again in Gilead's "true believers"; they reject all materiality for selfless service. The premise that nature, not culture, is responsible for women's role is often put forth in "scientific" fashion.

"Objectivity" in academia

The Handmaid's Tale (HT) is, as I've tried to show, both intensely political and surprisingly comic. It is difficult for academics to categorize (that exercise so beloved of academics everywhere, labeling): anti-religion, science fiction, feminist manifesto, post-structuralist satire? The novel centers on many of my own concerns: tactics of the feminist movement, the impossibility of finding the "truth," the horrors of religious fervor gone out of control. Here, however, I'd like to think about the "Historical Notes" section of HT, arguing that this tacked-on chapter is Atwood's sly way of lampooning the academy she knows so well.

The "Historical Notes" focus on the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies convention, and include the opening remarks of the chair and then the keynote address of Professor Pieixoto. It is one of Atwood's brilliant comic touches that this conference, though two hundred years in the future, retains the same format as virtually every 1990s academic conference: an important personage is introduced by the chair, with the usual reverence for his extensive publications, his stature at Cambridge (there will always be an England) and his work in the twentieth- and twenty-first century archives. He proceeds to give a jargon-laden, impeccably researched, and "objective" scientific talk on the "soi-disant manuscript" (282) he's named "The Handmaid's Tale," followed by "Applause. Are there any questions?" (293).

Throughout the paper Professor Pieixoto casually drops in the titles of other publications: "Sumptuary Laws Through the Ages: an Analysis of Documents," "Iran and Gilead: Two Late-Twentieth Century Monotheocracies as Seen Through Diaries" (282), and "The Notion of 'Seed' in Early

Gilead" (290). (As Hite remarks of a similar endeavor, "... he was already engaged in significant literary feuds. The occasion was 'Haiku and Icon : The Integrity of the Aesthetic Artifact Once Again'-- he was going for colons in a big way ..." [62]), or, as a social sciences grad student once said to me, "Why does everyone in English have titles that start with a quotation, then have a colon and the real title?"

More on titles:

> **I was sure they wouldn't reject an article that had both paradigm and topos in the title** (Hite, 83).
>
> **"'Some Aspects' of something always sounds right, doesn't it?" Alan looked rather annoyed. One did not joke about the titles of articles in learned journals, as I knew to my cost.** (Pym AQ 169)

Professor Pieixoto displays a liking for name-dropping and a relish for showing his erudition: "... echoes here of the fertility rites of early Earth-goddess cults" (289); "... the possibility of fatherhood, so redolent of status" (293); "[w]e may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer" (293).

Andersen, in "Changing the Curriculum in Higher Education," discusses the invisible paradigms that represent unspoken or unthought-of assumptions on what and how we teach and what we value. These standards, supposedly objective and arrived at democratically, are those of the elite: white Western men (53). Though Professor Pieixoto gives his paper in 2195, it appears nothing of substance has changed: the psuedoscientific, the hierarchy, and the working of the elite are still valued over appreciating the various "truths," or realizing that we all "make patterns of the facts." Aiken et al. write that "many scholars remain rooted in the Western academic tradition of distance, detachment, and denial, retaining the conviction that scholarly neutrality is the necessary condition to promote objective truth-seeking ..." (121).[23]

> **Tom snorts. "Since when am I supposed to notice who cleans my office?"**
>
> **He probably doesn't notice who cleans his house, either. It's probably some deficiency in me that I notice. If you're serious about the profession you probably just throw things on the floor and figure God will take care of them.** (Hite 144)

Through Atwood's brilliant juxtaposition of Offred's funny, articulate, and wryly honest memoirs and Professor Pieixoto's narrowly focused, dry, and academically "correct" paper, the dilemma of academic writing (answering) versus personal writing (questioning) is posed. In the "Notes," Atwood is able to make explicit a key concern of the novel: the elevation, and abuse of, "objective" and scientific knowledge.

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[23] Part of this "objective truth-seeking" involves ignoring a great deal of women's daily lives. Leaving aside the obvious neglect in areas like childbirth, menstruation, adolescence, sexual experience, consider the various kinds of "women's work" which remain undiscussed, not written about because mundane, ordinary, boring: the business of the kitchen, the nursery, the bedroom. Offred's world, so frustratingly opaque to Professor Pieixoto, is strangely familiar to many women readers.

> In her emphasis on female duties such as shopping, cooking, gardening, knitting, and in her depiction of feminine gossip, friendship and childbearing, Atwood's novel strikes us as narrowly mimetic despite its futuristic trappings. The combination is suggestive and not unprecedented: male readers of science fiction are confronted with their creation and fear of an alien other gender, while female readers of "women's novels" revisit their lives in the distortions of a surrealist mirror. (Lacombe 5)

Joanna Russ explores this academic ignorance of female experience when she tells of a rejection by one of her short stories by a male colleague "on the grounds that it did not accurately represent the options open to a female adolescent of the 1950s (a subject he presumably knew more about than I did)" or when Jane Eyre is dismissed by a male academic as "lousy" because it is "nothing but female erotic fantasies" (46). Again, as Althusser notes, the academy presents itself as untainted by ideology, completely value-free, neutral and neuter. "Many feminists argue the automatic devaluation of women's experience and consequent attitudes, values, and judgments springs from an automatic devaluation of women per se, the belief that manhood is 'normative' and womanhood somehow 'deviant' or 'special'" (Russ 41).

Offred's story is hers alone: events are seen through her eyes, qualified, explained, even apologized for. She knows the precariousness of positing one truth, of objectivity, and throughout the narrative she reminds us of this: John Goddard sees Offred as a "flagrant hypocrite" (8) for her different versions of the story. Offred's telling and retellings are not a deceit, however, but suggest her honesty: frequently, she calls your attention to her unreliability, her wishful thinking, her self-censorship,[24] and even her recognition that the story is "un-literary":

> I don't want to be telling this story .... I wish [it] were different. I wish it were more civilized .... I wish it had more shape. (267)

Offred admits her own "bad" behavior and predicts the reader's response to it: "I am coming to a part you will not like at all, because in it I did not behave well ...." (252), and "There wasn't any thunder, though, I added that in ....," and, a few sentences later, "it didn't happen that way either," admitting, "[a]ll I can hope for is a reconstruction..." (246).

This is in amazing contrast to traditional ways of writing (my seventh-grade English teacher harping at people who used "dear readers"-- "Pretend they're not THERE!"). Offred is trying to do what I'm trying to do: to tell the truth in a voice "that doesn't pretend to be ultimate, academic" (Barrows quoted in Blau DuPlessis 264).

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[24] Laughter, like anger, has a way of freeing one from the "interior censor" (Bakhtin 94). There is a very close relationship in feminism and feminist writing between laughter and anger, discussed by Regina Barreca in her introduction to Last Laughs and Jane Marcus' "Daughters of anger/material girls" in the same volume. A sense of humor and a sense of anger are intertwined, since both are political and one often incites the other.

From a first-year composition textbook:

FORMAL

VOCABULARY:	often abstract; technical; specialized; no contradictions or colloquialisms
SENTENCE AND PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE:	all sentences complete; sentences usually long, complex; paragraphs fully developed, often at length
TONE:	impersonal, serious, often instructional
TYPICAL USES:	legal documents, some textbooks, academic writing, scientific reports

GENERAL

VOCABULARY:	the language of educated persons; nonspecialized, balance of abstract and concrete; readily understood
TYPICAL USES:	most of what we read: newspapers, magazines, novels, business correspondence.

(*The Bare Essentials*, 214)

In the very fact of it being told, Offred's story is political, but it is also intensely political in style: fragmented, subjective, "like a body caught in crossfire or pulled apart by force" (251). In the "Notes," Atwood attacks the academic propensity for making Offred's story the subject of deadening, trivializing study; above all, the academic study of the story is portrayed by Pieixoto not as a political act, but as an act of scholarly understanding:

> If I may be permitted an editorial aside, allow me to say that in my opinion we must be cautious about passing moral judgement upon the Gileadeans. Surely we have learned by now that such judgements are of necessity culture-specific. Also, Gileadean society was under a good deal of pressure, demographic and otherwise, and was subject to factors from which we ourselves are happily more free. Our job is not to censure but to understand. (*Applause*). (284)

Such smug and "scientific" declarations, their condescension and their lack of concern for the many layers of truth in a place like Gilead, is the traditional view. Politics can be eliminated from academic study, runs this argument, because politics contaminate knowledge by making judgments or evaluations. People like Professor Pieixoto believe in The Truth, a single "apolitical objective knowledge" (Spender, MSM 1), putting forward a partial truth and ignoring any contradictions, what Aiken calls "the ideology inherent in 'neutral' scholarship" (111).

Pieixoto, on the surface, seems to be making the laudable argument that events must be viewed in the context of their times-- a point which the Woolf of Judith Shakespeare would applaud. And there is a positive side to Pieixoto's refusal to judge, which complicates my argument; nonetheless, I shouldn't ignore it. His decision to favor understanding over judgment has its merits if put in a feminist context-- that is, many feminists reject Eurocentrism (and ethnocentrism generally) as well as the propensity to judge actions by so-called "male" standards, for example. In some ways, his point is akin to my own: that academics often reject an act of communication, without making an effort to understand it. Tied to this is my own fear that this thesis will be dismissed out of hand because of its style. Having thus tried to understand the good professor, though, I believe Atwood intended him to be somewhat reprehensible. He uses the "no judgment" as a way of relinquishing responsibility for comparing Gileadean society to his own. His belief that "we are happily more free" than Gileadeans serves to distance the listeners from Offred's experience. They can go home smug in the knowledge that this can't happen here, will never happen, and never examine the structure of a society that demands subtler forms of the Gileadean experience to keep Althusser's "endless chain" (123) unbroken.

In academia, as noted, "objective" language obscures the multiple nature of the truth and posits "knowledge" as a single entity.

> ... formal English, which is the appropriate language of much academic and professional writing, is heavily influenced by the conventions established by writers and educators in the past. It usually treats specialized topics and addresses relatively limited audiences. .... It may also employ many abstract words .... The formal English used in scientific, technical, and scholarly writing is usually impersonal. .... the single-minded attention to the subject, the compact and orderly statement of ideas, and the moderate use of technical terms ... characterize formal English. (A Writer's Handbook of Current English, Third edition)

How objective is Professor Pieixoto? Besides his remark about the role of academics, he discusses Gilead's borrowings from several repressive systems: the Handmaids' red dresses, the Salvagings, the collective rope ceremonies: " ... there was little that was truly original or indigenous to Gilead; its genius was synthesis" (289), he says in a tone I can only read as approval, or, at best, tolerance. His comment shows that he recognizes misogynist tendencies in his own society, but throughout the talk he distances himself from them. This admiration is a hallmark of the academic promotion of "masculinity as the ideal political behavior"-- the

> unexplained and unexamined assumptions that those stereotyped characteristics held up as the masculine ideal (e.g. aggressiveness, competitiveness, pragmatism, etc.) are the norms of political behaviour as well. (J. Lovenduski in Spender, 89, quoting Bourque Grossholtz, 1974, 229)

How is this stance of detachment and objectivity achieved? How can Professor Pieixoto, a well-educated man, travel such a distance from Gilead's cruelty to pronounce it "genius"?

By using naming as a distancing device. By theorizing. By making cold, detached, and objective what is passionate, involved and personal (it's ironic that Offred writes of the Gileadean method of control:

"...create an it, where none was before" [180]). Scholarly progress is seen to be made only in pigeonholing and labeling. To name, in Atwood's view, is to make known, but it is also to limit or narrow one's perception of the thing named. So Offred is turned into an "it"-- an Of- Fred; her mother is an Unwoman, Moira a Jezebel. Others are generic also: Angels, Eyes, Commanders, Aunts. As Spender notes in Man Made Language, feminists recognize that names matter-- possibly because names and labels determine so much of us. Pieixoto believes in the determining power of names; Offred's subversive refusal to provide him with her "real" name (which would tend to fix her even more in his mind as the Eternal Feminine) is like the positive refusal in Gubar's "The Blank Page."

(Oh, you feminists and your NAMES! Does it really matter what we call you - as long as we call you? chuckles Academia. Isn't it easier just to use what's there? Why fault poor old language, or the government, or the Journal again?)

To the good Professor, politics and historical scholarship cannot ever mix. One is about passion, emotion, irrationality, hysteria; the other glows in a cool, clear light of correctness, concreteness, provability. Social scientists like Professor Pieixoto

> had labored long under the yoke of their traditional ties to the humanities with their softer, literary traditions that often made for Great Thoughts but lacked the precision, the accuracy, the certitude of real science .... the social sciences worked furiously to adopt not only the methodologies of real science but also the language, the academic structures, and even the mannerisms of their white-coated brethren. (Sykes 204)

Pieixoto, in his eminently scholarly and self-congratulatory paper, analyzes the Gileadean political system-- precisely how it was set up and why: " ... the sociobiological theory of natural polygamy was used as a scientific justification for some of the odder practices of the regime ..." (288). He does this by scouring Offred's account for clues and investigating them via computer. He spends most of his energy attempting to discover the "true" identity of the Commander, commenting that if this detail can be found, "at least some progress would have been made" (288). The characters, education, and background of the two possibilities are microscopically analyzed, down to hair color and degree of religious fervor.

> ... you spent the entire session discussing whether or not John Keats had had syphilis. You had done a considerable amount of research on the medical uses of mercury in the early part of the century, and your last paragraph was a masterpiece of inconclusion. (Atwood, "Hair Jewellery," 128)

Offred, as one who attempts to tell the truth, is shoved to the background in scientific style:

> ... many gaps remain. Some of them could have been filled by our anonymous author, had she had a different turn of mind. She could have told us much about the workings of the Gileadean empire, had she had the instincts of a reporter or a spy. What would we not give, now, for even twenty pages or so of printout from Waterford's personal computer! (292)

Offred is "shown" to be a mere crumb from the table of the Goddess of History; ironically, given the Professor's smugness at the new world's progress, Offred is being exploited by traditionalists again. Her soul and her mind are "academized," turned to jargon and made bloodless ("the human heart remins a factor" [293]); as is so much of women's lives, her remarkable experience is turned into a vehicle for upholding the status quo, through minor things like Pieixoto's sexist jokes to his unquestioning acceptance of Gilead's historical necessity.[25] The jargon itself works to distance Offred from the academic listeners, to render her an it, a thing: what Offred feared most. It is only the power of the "original" text, with its quietly subversive questioning, that keeps Pieixoto from having the last word.

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[25] Professor Pieixoto indulges in what Russ calls "false categorizing" in his interpretation of Offred's tapes. Once the label "confessional" is fixed on a work, it can no longer be taken seriously. Diaries,

"Great Unexpectations"

Adrienne Rich discusses the university as a "breeding ground not of humanism, but of masculine privilege .... [women] have been made participants in a system that prepares men to take up roles of power ... that asks questions and teaches 'facts' generated by a male intellectual tradition, and that both subtly and openly confirms men as the leaders and shapers of human destiny both within and outside academia" (On Lies 127). This carries over to teaching, of course-- our students are taught to value the "ultimate, academic" voice over an honest or uncertain one. (I still remember the astonishment from my students in a first-year class when I admitted that I didn't know something.) My notes call this, rather grandly, the "paradox of breaking down structures"-- if I do introduce an informal, friendly style in the classroom, I'm thought to be less "serious" (serious being synonymous with good, valuable, enabling a starting salary of $30,000) and less

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personal letters and other "private" or "womanly" ways of writing are not (or have not been, until very recently) of value to the academy. Many of the most interesting ones have been severely edited, repressed, or simply never published at all. A related problem is the "cleaning up" of the original text. Denise Marshall decries the omission of photographs in 3G: "One could argue that reproducing photographs is an expensive proposition were it not that photographs accompany all of Woolf's biographical texts" (172). If one has seen an edition of Three Guineas that does include the photos, Woolf's comedy is much more apparent. But "Woolf's humor, her comedic range, her scorn, her sardonic funny satire, her anger became invisible because she pinned the patriarchy to the wall. Her feminist humor and her feminist theory threatened the order of things" (Marshall 175, my emph.).

effective teacher. That is, if I try to "combat the institutional hierarchy and professional exclusiveness that had been used to shut out women" (Boxer 74), I create a "tension between the qualities of warmth, on the one hand, and authority or competence on the other" (Martin, 585).

> **I feel as if I cannot win in the classroom. If I'm organized and 'professional' students perceive me as cold and rejecting. If I'm open and responsive and warm, I seem to be challenged and taken advantage of, perhaps considered not quite as bright.**
> (Martin 487)

But, Ms. Martin, women profs are an anomaly. Like women preachers, we are dogs walking on our hind legs. Worse, we are an intrusion. (I went downtown to pick up some material from the newspaper office for a summer school course I was teaching. The secretary was reluctant to give it to me. "You'll see that it gets to the real teacher, won't you, honey?" Or, as what happened today: on the way to my office, I literally stumbled over a student waiting outside my office. She said, "Don't bother knocking, none of the teachers are here yet." I said, "One is now." These expectations, these assumptions. What can one person do? I mentioned "feminist" to my junior high school English class. One girl raised her hand and said, "You mean men who act like women?")

(My husband, also a sessional lecturer. The library phones him, calls him Professor K. They phone me: "Is Michelle there?" Neither of us tells our students just what to call us, waiting to see what develops. It seems that women students invariably call me "Miss"; men use my first name. A bit revealing-- is that to make me more authoritarian to other women, more approachable-- or something more sinister-- to the men?)

Requiring a strict label diminishes teachers; it may diminish the writers we teach about even more. I see its necessity: a sort of shorthand for convenience's sake. But so often the label becomes all that a teacher or a writer is allowed to be: Joan Delacourt's Lady Oracle poetry is taken seriously enough that she becomes a "culture heroine .... unpleasant as it had been, I'd discovered it was much better than not being taken seriously. I would rather dance as a ballerina, though faultily, than as a flawless clown" (289). Her book ("a cross between Kahil Gibran and Rod McKuen") is marketed as "Modern love and the sexual battle, dissected with a cutting edge and shocking honesty" (236); since Women's Lib is a current hot topic, it can be exploited for sales by the publishers. Joan is tagged as a "female Leonard Cohen," and a set of behaviors is mapped out for her. She's so determined to be thought of as a "serious" writer that she considers paying a blackmailer to keep her Costume Gothics a secret. Since she's been labeled "serious," she is not allowed to do anything that might violate expectations; she's being a survivor, albeit a schizophrenic one, when she divides her identity into Louisa K. Delacourt, writer of Love Defied, and Joan Foster, ethereal yet political poetess. (Eleanor Nyland, the specialist in Wordsworth, also creates an alter ego, Gabrielle Stephanie de Vere, for writing a pornographic novel for women, knowing full well this activity would be frowned upon by the all-male English department staff.) Margaret Atwood, who has complained of the public's perceptions of her as Margaret the Medusa/Mother/Magician, in an article wryly titled "Great Unexpectations," outlines the choices for women writers:

> My choices were between excellence and doom on the one hand, and mediocrity and coziness on the other. .... To the garret and the TB I added the elements of enigma and solitude .... White Goddesses did not have time for children, being too taken up with cannibalistic sex, and Art came first. (79)

Lilly, the young author in *Hotel New Hampshire*, also has trouble with expectations for successful authors. After one success, she says, "I still have to write. I mean, now I'm *expected* to grow" (346, orig. emph.). The condescending reviewers, who say she wasn't really a BAD writer, despite her fame, make Lilly believe she had to get more serious. She writes a vague and obscure book, one that she hates because of its "self-examinations that led nowhere, its plotlessness ... its absence of story" (400).

> Somehow, among a certain university population, the obvious failure to be clear confirms that what any fool knows is a vice can be rearranged, by art, to resemble a virtue.
>
> "Where in hell do these college kids *get* such an idea!" Franny would complain.
>
> "Not all of them have this idea," Frank would point out.
>
> "They think what's forced and strained and *difficult* with a fucking capital D is *better* than what's straightforward, fluent, and comprehensible!" Franny shouted. (400-401)

Lilly cannot live up to the critics' or her own expectations of greatness. But she fully recognizes the pretensions of academia; when she is a writer-in-residence, the Lecture Committee tries to decide whether to spend its remaining budget on two visits by moderately well-known poets, one visit by a famous writer, or to contribute all the money to partially cover the costs of a woman who impersonates Virginia Woolf. Lilly is the only committee member who objects to this:

> It is ... disgusting that you-- as teachers of literature-- would actually spend money on an actress imitating a dead writer, whose work you do not teach, rather than spend it on a living writer, whose work you probably haven't read. Especially .... when you consider that the woman whose work is not being taught, and whose person is being imitated, was virtually *obsessed* with the difference between greatness and *posing*. (411, orig. emph.)

Irving, like the other authors, attacks the double standards of academia. Lilly's preoccupation with representing the "truths" of experience, and in trying to be honest, is rare in a setting that values appearance, money, and "public relations."

Experience vs. the Academic: Specialization

> As Rice observes, narrowly specialized research, directed to a community of professionals beyond the local campus, is the 'central professional endeavor and the focus of academic life' (Rajagopal and Farr 275).

Another common element in these novels: they lampoon overspecialization and the academic love for labeling. Most women's studies programs emphasize the broad-based, interdisciplinary approach to knowledge-- not that one must be a jack-of-all trades, but they stress the importance of different "ways of seeing."[26]

> ... it seems to me that the university or the academic community in general represents a very narrow view of literature .... we shouldn't blame so much the fact that writers teach now for a living or that universities support them for that, as we should, in general, realize that specialization is killing a lot of things-- you know, the designated hitter in baseball is a relatively new phenomenon, too. (Miller [interview with Irving], 200)

Trumper's father the urologist, on refusing to write a prescription for his grandson, rumbles, "You're in graduate school, aren't you? Surely you know the importance of specialization" (30). And Trumper ruefully admits that his thesis chairman had "never been exposed to such specialization as mine" (30).

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[26] Woolf's Three Guineas is an excellent example of a text that combines the personal and scholarly approaches. It weights its arguments with legalistic language and accretes a multitude of examples as support, blending psychology, literary criticism, sociology, anecdote and "fiction." Its "daughter of anger," Millett's Sexual Politics, "pushed at the boundaries of literary criticism, through interpreting books in fresh ways, and ranged beyond ..." (Stimpson 29-30). Both texts suggest that feminist literary texts, and studies of such texts, can broaden the typically ultra-specialized approaches to literature, history, politics, and other narrowly defined disciplines.

> The object of writing a Ph.D thesis is to enable the student to master and contribute to the literature of a given subject, and to digest, order, and present his or her findings more comprehensively than in essays or in an M.A. thesis. The work should be of a high calibre and advance knowledge in the student's major field of study .... it should be genuinely interesting and important. (University of Alberta Department of English Graduate Guide, 1991-2, 53)

Bogus' translation-- the only translation-- of the Old Low Norse ballad Akthelt and Gunnel-- is a lovely example of the rarefied air of academia. He wants to include a glossary and an etymological dictionary of Old Low Norse, presumably to "advance knowledge in [his] field of study." But he finds that since Old Low Norse "is pretty damn old, and the origins are rather obscure" (31), it's easier to make up the words, since "no one knew anything" about the language anyway, including his thesis chairman. Trumper's translation gets looser and looser with more parallels to his personal life (the childhood friend absconding with Akthelt's wife, the "operation" suffered by Sprog) until he sees the "inevitable doom. Clearly Akthelt and Gunnel were headed for grief. I knew, and I simply didn't want to see it out" (53). Trumper makes fun of himself for identifying so strongly with his story, envisioning his friends' reactions to him: "the only one we knew who could see a lousy movie and love it, read a rotten book and weep, if it had a flicker or a jot to do with him!" (33) In the end, of course, he realizes that he cannot truthfully give Akthelt and Gunnel a happy ending-- he has to accept that, like his marriage to Biggie and his love for Merrill Overturf, some things end rather badly (a fine parallel, incidentally, to Pym's, Spark's, and Atwood's "women victimized by fiction").[27]

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[27] Literary models for "feminine" behavior abound. Barbara Brothers

(Like "Old Bogus's mush-minded ability to read his own sentimentality into everything around him" (33), like Garp, who believes that when you're writing, everything seems related to everything else-- I keep trying to connect everything.)

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characterizes Pym's women as hurt by their novelistically, poetically-inspired expectations of marriage, family, and "happily ever after" endings. Feminist comic writers are practitioners of what Blau DuPlessis calls "writing beyond the ending." A chief characteristic of comedy, especially in feminist applications, is a refusal of closure, making for often "messy" ends to a novel. Atwood is well known for this technique. This exchange is from an interview about *Bodily Harm*:

> [Bonnie Lyons]: At the end of the novel it seems to me that you make it deliberately unclear whether she will ever get out of prison or not.
>
> [Atwood]: Your choice, reader's choice. I like the reader to participate in writing the book ... It makes a difference in a way, but whether she gets out or not, she has still undergone an experience that has changed her way of seeing. John Berger's book [quoted in the epigraph] is called *Ways of Seeing* (80).

The denial of closure in feminist comedy is compatible with the denial of "finishedness" in Rabelaisian comedy, with its ever-changing, ever-growing bodies, unstable roles and shifting identities. Both Irving and Atwood have described their endings as "affirmative." But their endings, like Pym's and Spark's (generally speaking) contradict or outright deny the "nobody dies, everybody gets married" pattern, opting for more ambiguous stopping points. Bogus Trumper, at the end of his story, smiles "cautiously"; Offred goes "toward the darkness, or else the light"; Mildred believes she might have "a full life after all"; Jane Wright calmly pins up her hair while London savagely celebrates V.J. night. Even the novels which *seem* to have conventional endings are still somewhat ambiguous, or even blatant parodies of traditional comic endings. *The Edible Woman* has a marriage, but it's of the "wrong" people; *Some Tame Gazelle* celebrates singleness at the end; *Garp*'s epilogue, we're told, is a warning, but it also gives a sense of continuation, as does *Memento Mori*'s similar "body count." These are attempts, too, to break up the sequence of events. Atwood, in *Murder in the Dark*, mocks "Happy Endings": John and Mary meet and are given a variety of endings, happy and tragic, labeled A-F. In keeping with Judy Little's terminology, these novels end in a "liminal" state: between stages, on the margins, "between the acts." As Russ says in exasperation, "I've been trying to finish this monster for thirteen ms. pages and it won't. Clearly it's not finished.

You finish it" (132)

Specialization is also the target of some wicked satire in The Edible Woman. Duncan, a spaced out grad student in English, invites Marian to dinner, where the latest literary fads are discussed. (Interestingly, Fish believes that "the nineteenth century is very hot property these days" [200], while Eleanor Nyland in Class Porn keeps getting told that "Wordsworth is very much out of favor" [23], although both novels are set in the late 1960s. So much for finding a safely trendy specialization.) Fish goes on a lit-crit rant about Alice in Wonderland:

> ... very suggestive rabbit-burrow, becoming as it were pre-natal .... nor does she respond positively to the dominating-female role of the Queen .... a rather destructively-phallic identity ... a cyclical rather than a linear obsession ... (201)

To which Trevor "cattily" remarks, "... Fischer gets much too Viennese, especially when he drinks. Besides, he's so out of date. The very latest approach to Alice is just to dismiss it as a rather charming children's book." (202). Here again, "correct" approaches and attitudes are lampooned.

Bogus' "mush-mindedness" in seeing himself reflected in his academic work is one of those "emperor's new clothes" situations: no one wants to admit that this is done in scholarly work; we must all maintain the proper distance, correctness, and scientific objectivity. Revelation of personal experience is generally frowned upon-- it is a "maudlin," irrelevant, or (worst of all) incorrect method of teaching or learning. Beetham, in a case study of a women's studies course, notes "... the eruption of the seminar into experience, which is posed against the academic .... will it lapse into 'mere' anecdote? Is it not precisely this connection of what they know with what the course offers which I should nurture?" (TW 186). Or is it better to continue with business as usual-- relegating the personal to the margins, between the lines, the notes furtively scribbled?

Living on the Margins: Sessionals and graduate students

> Parallels between women's subordination in academe and part-time faculty's marginalization are striking, and to a substantial degree overlapping. (Rajagopal and Farr 275)

It does not seem coincidence that all of the graduate-school parodies I've recently seen concern the most marginal members of the academy: sessional lecturers, particularly those who are simultaneously graduate students and lecturers. There seems to be a whole sub-culture of novels written by and about these people: not just Irving's novel and Atwood's stories ("Polarities," "Hair Jewellery," "Lives of the Poets," and *The Edible Woman*), but *Class Porn*, and *A Nest of Singing Birds* all mock the position of such peripheral, in-limbo aspiring academics.

> **Many graduate students have a siege mentality.**
> -Harvard's *Confidential Guide*

In my own graduate program, being a sessional lecturer is faintly ridiculous: you are considered "staff" for things like the holy privilege of joining the Faculty Club ($25/month), but rarely are we equally represented on committees; so marginal are we that we do not get health insurance or any other perks. The most obvious physical symbol of our marginality (are we staff? are we students?) is the existence of separate mailrooms: fulltime staff have one mailroom, TAs and sessionals another. And Doris Badir, the University's former Equity Officer, surveyed sessional lecturers in 1989-90 and even had difficulty *finding* all of us. They do, however, know how to use us:

> ... universities have filled the breach with a combination of graduate students (even, occasionally, undergraduates), part-timers and so-called gypsies, professors hired on a year-to-year basis who are, in effect, the coolies of the academic work force. (Sykes 42)

A later note: I'm aware that, having set up an "us/them" binary I now must, with mixed feelings, add that I've now joined the "them." Though I'm not yet tenured, I have been hired on full time, tenure-track. I don't think that this makes my observations, written during some of my five years as a teaching/research assistant and sessional lecturer, any less valid. Two of the six members of my present department are sessional instructors, both women who teach composition and Intro. to Lit. almost exclusively. Paradoxically, my "ascension" to assistant professor has left me feeling more of an outsider in some ways, since my own division, Arts and Humanities, has 20 men and 2 women, which makes for some rather odd meetings. As a feminist at a small and conservative liberal arts college, it can get a bit lonely at times.

Two things work to preserve the situation: most sessional instructors, particularly in Humanities departments, are female; secondly, and linked to this, is the contempt for "lowly" teaching--that is, since teaching undergraduates is unimportant in the grand structure of academia, women, especially marginal ones, are allowed to do it. It is a grudging allowance: undergraduates must be taught, so let's throw both ill-respected groups together. Let poorly paid, overworked women do the dirty work, while the real work of the university-- research-- is done mainly by men.

> **Q. What's an academic woman's dearest wish?**
> **— I don't know. Becoming department head?**
> **A. No. Tenure before menopause.**

> (A woman writing of herself and other sessional lecturers in English: "They are 'exhausted, degraded, and full of despair'." [Chell] 37])

(My nightmarish first year here: three graduate courses, a section of first-year composition/literature, and two of us living on one salary.

How can you do anything justice-- teaching or your own work-- when there is no time, no money, and no power? And is it coincidence that such abuses of graduate students seem to occur in language or literature departments, where a majority of graduate assistants are women?) No wonder everything seems to take us longer than we would like.

> **Q: How many Ph.D students does it take to change a light bulb?**
> **A: One, but it takes him ten years.**

> **Q: What's the difference between sessional and tenure?**
> **A: A half-year course, a window in your office, and $15,000.**

On the lower steps of academia reside the marginal: mostly women and a few men. These groups support the more powerful academics.

> (A sessional lecturer: "A coolie has a hard time understanding the politics of the rickshaw". [Chell 35])

Feminist comedy is one of the few techniques, it seems, that is able to take on the hierarchy by mercilessly exposing its ridiculousness. Pym's An Academic Question, for example, first makes the theft of a valuable anthropological document farcical, and then rather pathetic (it's stolen from a dying old man). The in-fighting and back-stabbing is doubly funny in Pym's view because academics, like the clergy, are supposed to know better. Pym presents this very silly incident quite seriously, letting readers-- and the "graduate wife," Caro-- judge the importance of statements like "An editor must be all things to all men." Caro, with us, says, "That seems to give him and his world an exaggerated importance" (153). Like many Pym women, Caro deftly deflates academic jargon:

> "And it's now in the archives of the university library?" asked Rollo.
> "I wouldn't exactly call them archives," I put in. "It's just an untidy old cupboard in the librarian's office." (153, orig. emph.)

Pym also mocks the notion of the university as a shelter, "a nice scholarly refuge whose contributors would be above all envy and malice" (149). Margaret Atwood, when questioned about her experience in the "ivory tower," replies, "It wasn't ivory. It was a hotbed of vicious behavior" (Lyons 77). Feminist comic writers call into question the idea that one group, by virtue of its profession (teaching or preaching) or location (village folk as more "worthy") is innately more noble, more wise, and less petty than outsiders. Pym shows academia's resemblance to a game when one character remarks on the unfortunate shortage of obscure poets to "work on."

Similarly, Woolf's deadpan and exaggeratedly respectful description of the procession of the "sons of educated men" in 3G makes us look with fresh eyes at the tyranny of a society structured around personal and political hierarchy. Looking (which, as Atwood says, is not passive but active) and analyzing such "givens" as the educational system is visionary and revolutionary. Q.D. Leavis responded to Three Guineas by bewailing its effects on existing civilization.

> Virginia Woolf's point was just that: the need to end civilization as we know it, to the extent that it depends on fascism within the family and in the state, the unpaid devotion of women in the home, the exploitation of women in the workplace, and an implicit structure of values that favors competition, hierarchy, and violence. (Black 193)

Pym's posthumously published An Academic Question was, as her biographer Hazel Holt makes clear, "inspired by an academic wrangle in the journal Africa" [for which Pym worked] ("Note" to AQ). Though the theft of a manuscript is the focus of the action, Pym also mocks the "king and his court" structure of academia, often presenting Important Personages in the imagery of religion:

> Crispin was sitting at his desk, surrounded by graduate students, including several Africans.
> "What's happening?" I asked Alan.
> "Crispin's distributing largesse," said Alan dryly.
> "Offprints of his last article, you mean?"
> .... "Professor Maynard has taught us so much of our history," said one of the Africans, "that we didn't know before". (AQ 11)

One might argue that several novels effectively parody academic life: A Nest of Singing Birds, Lucky Jim, A Confederacy of Dunces. The difference between a non-feminist spoof of academia and a feminist one like An Academic Question is that Jim Dixon is a social climber in Northrop Frye's comic pattern. He uses academia as a way of acquiring alcohol, women, and other creature comforts. When he "luckily" finds an easier way of doing this, he gladly leaves academia behind. He never critiques academia as an institution or suggests it has potential to be otherwise; his objections to its drabness and rarefied air are more irritation against the academy's inconvenience than attacks on its fundamental structure.[28]

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[28] In fact, one could argue that Lucky Jim is conservative comedy, since Dixon achieves happiness ("gets the girl," the money, and the promise of a blissful life in London) at novel's end. He overcomes all the "blocking characters," to use Frye's terminology. Amis is somewhat anti-feminist, since his sole female academic victimizes men emotionally and financially, and Jim is presented as "saving" the beautiful Christine from the pretentious world of Art. Jim rejects the academy as hopeless, yet embraces other conservative status symbols so fervently that I'd question the seriousness of his dismissal of the academy. In contrast, Pym's "academic" novels, like her "church" novels, juxtapose traditional behavior and unconventional behavior, the "official" world of the church and the school is subversively undercut by a (usually predominantly female, or domestic) "underground" or "unofficial" world. These two novels illustrate my earlier point about the difference between conservative and revolutionary comedy (in Pym's case, revolutionary feminist comedy). Lucky Jim closely follows the traditional pattern of comedy, down to the unlikely happy ending. Pym's texts reject the premise of "achieving" happiness as a goal, and focus instead on the process of living.

Pym's novels, especially those that deal with anthropological subjects, stress the importance of breaking away from conventional ways of viewing other people. Mildred, for instance, is surprised to see Everard Bone in church: "He was certainly the last person I should have expected to see here. I suppose I was ignorant enough to imagine that all anthropologists must be unbelievers, but the appearance of Everard Bone had shaken my complacency considerably" (ExW 49). Most of Pym's women characters are perfectly willing to think about other people, and themselves, in new ways-- a characteristic that does not fit in with the stereotype of the middle-aged spinster. When Rocky Napier remarks on the unfashionableness of the district in which they live, Mildred counters with "I like to think of it when it was a marsh and wild boars roamed over it" (ExW 31), deftly deflating his pretensions in Rabelaisian fashion-- by "lowering the abstract to the earthy." Caro's young daughter Kate learns about reproduction from seeing baby hedgehogs. Alan, the academic, is horrified: he "would be displeased to think of Kate learning about such things from Dolly and from such a low form of life as the hedgehog, which was covered with fleas" (AQ 31). Many of Pym's women, like Irving's Susie the bear, blur the lines between animals and people, a process which can be highly "educational."

Mildred's love for studying people, and learning from them ("Such richness!" as Jane would say) is set directly against the formal and "detached" study of anthropology, a process that also occurs with formal and informal religion (see Chapter Two). The extended scene where Helena Napier and Everard Bone speak on incomprehensible anthropological topics is an excellent example of this. Mildred is told that "we aren't here to enjoy ourselves. The paper will be long and the chairs hard"

(86). As in 3G, a woman sits indoors on a beautiful spring day and thinks it strange; Mildred sees "the tender green of a newly unfolded tree" (86) while trying dutifully to listen. Pym hilariously chronicles Mildred's thoughts as she wills herself to concentrate on the proceedings: "But I must not look out of the window; this was a great occasion and I was a privileged person. It was certainly a pity that my lack of higher education made it impossible for me to concentrate on anything more difficult than a fairly straightforward sermon or committee meeting" (ExW 86). Then, with the close observation of a trained anthropologist, she minutely studies the crowd and her surroundings. At the end of the lecture:

> "And now, I am sure there are many points you are eager to discuss," he went on, "who is-- ah-- going to start the ball rolling?"
>
> There was the usual embarrassed silence, nobody liking to be first. Some chairs scraped on the floor and a woman sitting along our row pushed past us and went out. She was carrying a string-bag, containing a newspaper-wrapped bundle from which a fish's tail protruded. (88)

In Three Guineas, Woolf juxtaposes the intensity of lived lives (the laughing gulls) with the "stale fish" of studied and "scientific fact." Her gentleman solemnly lecturing while "the lilac shakes its branches in the garden free, and the gulls, swirling and swooping, suggest with wild laughter that such stale fish might with advantage be tossed to them" (114), beautifully contrasts the smoggy, stuffy, and serious voice of the Academy with the breezy, open, wild laughter of another kind of learning. Pym is similarly revolutionary: tonight's dinner comically undercuts the solemn scholarly questioning.

> Poetry reading last night:
> -hot, fans whirring, eager apple-faces to get The Word, a guy who read in solemn measured tones classical allusions to "Roma," Dante (he'd spent 9 months there 6 years ago) and me sitting there with my hands smelling of rubber gloves and feet swollen,

trying to imagine HIM washing dishes before rushing over here.

> **An overheard story, origins unknown:**
> **-the first woman to address a learned society, onstage, nervous, audience sitting severefaced. An underling hands her a note, whispers: there is a stain on her dress, she should sit down. The woman turns to the audience: "and you should be PROUD to have a menstruating woman on your stage!"**

> "... but it is all life, and no aspect of life is to be despised" (*AQ* 18).

Andersen's need for honesty in academia arises again: why can't we state the irony of the gap between stated "educational missions and actual practices"? Because if female academics told the truth about their experiences, the world WOULD split open. Truth-telling would require "relinquishing [our] positions as beneficiaries of the 'meritocracy'" (Aiken 111). Therefore, should we, as Barbara Boxer labels it, wait for the "passing of a generation" instead of wasting time and effort on systemic change?

> A society defines for itself what knowledge is useful to it. The implicit myth of a neutral and definable entity which needs protection is a sign of a moribund system, one which has lost the sense of education as a social dynamic, concerned with empowerment, not control or conformity. (Florence 196)

It seems to me, to Dr. Florence and to many other feminist academics that systemic change, not "waiting for the revolution," is what is required-- here and now. One part of revolutionary change? We can begin by allowing ourselves and our students to tell their own truths, and to communicate different "ways of seeing."

Bogus Trumper: Portrait of the Academic as a Pathological Liar

Trumper, the "terribly ordinary," is 28, the same age I am, while writing his dissertation ("how is anything related to anything else?"), and having the same problems with objectivity, money, a Risky Mouse in the basement, and the blurrings between the thesis and real life. Joan Delacourt has this problem, too, when Arthur intrudes into her Costume Gothic.

(Presumption again. Pretend you're not in it. Put in some critics, some footnotes, some Theory, dammit. It's just like a woman, identifying with fictional characters. Why can't you be more subtle?)

So. Trumper is trying to write his dissertation. He and I both identify with poor old Harry Petz, another luckless grad student. Harry, while reading documents in Serbo-Croatian, peddles his swivel chair down the aisle of the library, trying to whiz through the window to the parking lot four floors down. On this occasion Trumper reports Old Thak's advice to his son, Akthelt: "Det henskit af krig er tu overleve" ("The object of war is to survive it.").

> Which struck me as the object of graduate school .... Such comparisons struck me hard in those days. (174)

Trumper, in another similarity to Akthelt and Gunnel, and in a variation on Henry James' theme, "prefer[s] to fall to pieces abroad" (213); after something resembling a nervous breakdown, he returns to New York. Here he receives a letter from his thesis chairman, enclosing an article bemoaning the lack of studies in "'previously untranslated works, from the Old West Norse, Old East Norse and Old Low Norse.' Dr. Wolfram Holster's comment was that the time was certainly 'ripe' for Akthelt and Gunnel" (316). After various adventures, sidetrackings, and confusion, Trumper goes through a monkish period of intense concentration on his thesis, working with a "dull, enduring sort of energy" (348). He decides, after earlier making up much of the translation, the footnotes, and the glossary of terms, to instead be "honest ... flat [and] direct" (348) about untranslatable words or things he simply didn't understand. Though in his earlier drafts he calls the metrics and rhyme scheme "multiple and flexible" (31), he finally admits that it had no real rhyme and that metrics were apparently unknown to its author (32).

> Eleanor Nyland, on her husband delivering "The Integrity of the Aesthetic Artifact Once Again": the paper was given "in the sort of room where you'd have expected to get a pitch for encyclopedias or Positive Thinking, packed with paternal gentlemen who seemed to be deciding whether he was the prodigal son. ... I tried not to go to sleep and counted words I wouldn't dare use: *polyvalent*, *equivocity*, *dithyrambic*, *iconography*. It seemed futile to continue pretending I was too pure to use them". (Hite 62)

This time "Bogus" Trumper is determined to avoid lies, equivocation, or misleading remarks under the guise of scholarly objectivity:

> [He] admitted to knowing nothing about the writings in Faroese. "I don't have the slightest idea as to whether this work has any relation to Faroese literature in this period," he wrote.
>
> Holster said, "Why don't you just say, 'I prefer to reserve judgment on the relationship of *Akthelt and Gunnel* to the Faroese hero-epics, as I have not researched Faroese literature extensively.'"
>
> "Because I haven't researched it at all," Trumper said. (349)

He is so determined to tell the truth that he admits, without academic white lies, *why* he uses prose for the epic, saying that the original verse was awful, "[a]nd my verse is worse" (348). Despite all that he is taught about the consequences of telling the whole truth, Trumper rather courageously gives Akthelt and Gunnel fair treatment-- in spite of his wish to give them a happy ending and a good marriage, he realizes that romanticism isn't always possible. In this he is similar, of course, to Offred: her story, unlike the traditional "feminine" romance, avoids the "happily ever after" ending, opting instead for an ambiguity that is like real life: she tries hard to avoid white lies that make her, as narrator, more appealing, instead acknowledging that "I did not behave very well." In this way, Offred and Bogus stand in marked contrast to their "superiors," Profs. Pieixoto and Holster, who use distortion masquerading as objectivity to tie up loose ends and satisfy the expectations of their audiences. Both professors have been well rewarded by the traditional system, so it's conceivable that their technique is a way of pledging allegiance to the status quo:

> **I believe that the more abstract the discourse of criticism becomes, the less it can change the lives of readers and the oppressive practices of institutions.** (Marcus 304)

> It seems pretty clear to me that if all we want to do is to write for professional advancement, to write for a fairly narrow circle of critics who exist within the same disciplinary boundaries as we do, there is nothing really wrong with the traditional academic style. In fact, it's the right style, the inevitable style, because it says, in every superfluous detail and in every familiar move, You don't need me except to write your own project; I am the kind of writing that does not want to be heard. (Torgovnick 27)

More Unexpectations: The Academy and Romanticism

> ... the sex-directed educators stimulated [girls'] sexual fantasy of fulfilling all desire for achievement, status, and identity vicariously through a man. Instead of challenging the girls' childish, rigid, parochial preconception of woman's role, they cater to it by offering them ... courses suitable only for a wifely veneer, or narrow programs ... well beneath their abilities and suitable only for a "stopgap" job between college and marriage (Friedan 157).

This thinking is rarely articulated: that a smattering of learning, enough for a "wifely veneer," is highly preferable to rigorous scholarship or unfeminine grappling with algebra, physics, Sanskrit or Marxism. *Pride and Prejudice*'s Bingley specifies "a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages" (34); today, finishing schools or governesses may not be blatant, but subtle messages (and some not so subtle) about female/ male educations still prevail. (Bharati Mukherjee: "An M.A. in English is considered refined, but a doctorate is far too serious a business, indicative more of brains than beauty, and likely to lead to a quarrelsome nature" [36].)

Barbara Pym, in her novels of the fifties, takes on the anachronistic education of women described in Friedan's Feminine Mystique, written a few years later. Like Austen, she examines the "accomplishments" necessary in the marriage market. Beginning with Jane and Prudence and ending with the posthumously edited and published An Academic Question, Pym comically questions the trappings of women's education. Jane and Prudence, for example, begins with a "Reunion of Old Students"; Miss Birkinshaw goes around the dinner table enumerating the accomplishments of her "girls": "'So all of you have married clergymen....' She liked her Old Students to be clearly labeled ..." (8), happy that Prudence's boss, "some kind of an economist or historian" writes the "kind of books that nobody could be expected to read" (9).

Pym consistently points out how women are, as Barbara Brothers calls it, "victimized by fiction" and by an unrealistic education. Pym, in her subtle way, points out the unreal expectations a traditional education gives women. Jane's education, formal and informal, has made her believe that the purpose of study is to bone up on her man's subject in order first to attract and then to keep him.

> ... [Jane] had started to learn Swedish-- there was still a grammar now thick with dust lying in the attic; and when she had first met Nicholas she had tried Greek. And now here was her own daughter caught up in the higher flights of Geography! (180)

Joan Delacourt, similarly "[f]aint with lust," rushes to the library and researches Bertrand Russell, Marx, and Mao, to make herself more attractive to her left-wing leaflet man, Arthur. As Brothers observes, Pym, like Woolf, chides novelists for not presenting truths about women's lives, and gives us characters who see romance as a nice but not essential part of life. Her characters are often exasperated at traditional emphases on love as an "interpreter" of their lives and a gauge of success or failure. Mildred's pugnacious announcement that she does _not_ resemble Jane Eyre shows the prevalence of literary role models, the ingraining of the romantic paradigm, and the necessity (and difficulty) of refusing it. Several other Pym characters wryly admit their early propensities for structuring expectations on models presented in romantic literature:

> I had been christened Caroline, which in my teens I had changed to Caro because of poor Lady Caroline Lamb, who said she was like the wreck of a little boat for she never came up to the sublime and beautiful. At sixteen it had seemed touching and amusing to think of oneself in this way, but as I grew older I could see that it was less admirable. (_AQ_ 4)

Like Prudence, Caro in her youth plunges into a "Byronic affair"; unlike Prudence, however, Caro later sees the affair as "the inevitable result of this early foolishness" (4), while Prudence "had got into the way of preferring unsatisfactory love affairs to any others, so that it was becoming almost a bad habit" (_J&P_ 8), as Jane observes. As for Jane herself, she notes (with an almost total lack of despair) that

> Mild, kindly looks and spectacles ...; this was what it all came to in the end. The passion of those early days, the fragments of Donne and Marvell and Jane's obscurer seventeenth-century poets, the objects of her abortive research, all these faded away into mild, kindly looks and spectacles. There came a day when one didn't quote poetry to one's husband any more. (_J&P_ 52)

Pym not only tackles women's university education and its incongruity with real life, but in _An Academic Question_, the category of "graduate wives" arises. Caro, like Clara in _The Edible Woman_, went to college but has devoted herself to marriage and family. Caro is surrounded by other frustrated graduate wives who are excellent housekeepers, cooks, and typists, "this last skill dating from the days when it was regarded as one of the duties of an academic wife" (7).

Ah, typing. Joan Delacourt intrudes again: "I was a good typist; at my high school typing was regarded as a female secondary sex characteristic, like breasts" (29). And Eleanor Nyland, in Class Porn, has much to say about typing: a sessional lecturer in English, she's flattered to be invited to join a committee on Basic English: "'So I thought you should be secretary .... That way you'll feel, you know, needed'" (18), the department head tells her. After several meetings at which she uses "intelligently conceived mnemonic devices (B.B. Black Two) that had got me through college with Highest Honors" (218) to get committee members coffee and type their rambling, pseudo-scientific notes ("goals and objectives," "interim measures," "accumulate, analyze, collate, prioritize, propose, dispose") on ditto masters, she realizes she is "mindless, hooked by their expectations. I'm the secretary. It makes sense. Who else could be?" (132).

> "I think Evan Cranton would want me to go on," I said. "After all, I can do other things like sticking labels on the back of books and typing out cards."
> "I might occasionally have some typing for you," said Alan graciously.
> "Thank you, darling" (AQ 178).

> "[Everard Bone] is a brilliant man," said Miss Doggett. [Mildred] helped him a good deal in his work, I think. Mrs. Bonner says that she even learned to type so that she could type his manuscripts for him."
> "Oh, then he had to marry her," said Miss Morrow sharply. "That kind of devotion is worse than blackmail -- a man has no escape from that". (J&P 143)

Caro and the other professors' wives have part-time jobs that entail "writing things on cards and putting them in boxes" (13). Her devotion to her husband's career is so great that she looks the other way when he steals a manuscript to use in a journal paper; when the manuscript must be secretly returned, she takes on a dull library job in order to sneak it back to the Stillingfleet Collection. She even attends the funerals of prominent anthropologists as Alan's "representative" (I suppose a traditionalist would argue that she's a half of a whole anyway).

> **(A woman was denied a trainer's license at Northlands Racetrack because her husband is a jockey, although trainers and jockeys who are blood related— mostly fathers and sons— are not subject to the same rules as a married couple. The rationale for the ruling: "Because a husband and wife can share the same bank account, 'that makes them one entity.'"** Something I didn't know, and should have: Alberta and Nova Scotia don't include marital status in the provincial human rights legislation. [The Edmonton Journal, August 30, 1989])

Conclusion: "Laughter as an antidote to dominance is sometimes indicated."

Derision-- like Woolf, I wish for a better word, but it will have to do-- is one of the most powerful teachers of educated men's daughters. Pelting the academic mulberry tree with laughter is the best way to ensure its destruction.

Women's studies, like laughter, holds out hope for this "moribund society." As I've tried to suggest, English studies as a discipline and part of the ideological state apparatus affect women in these ways:

-- it discourages women's full participation in their education; if in some areas we are allowed equal access, we are shunted to "feminine" areas of knowledge;

-- it excludes, by trivializing or by highly developed methods of shutting out, women's experience from the canon of higher knowledge;

-- it elevates the life of scientific objectivity or one Great Truth; the multiple, flexible, or personal are disregarded or made unimportant;

-- it economically abuses female staff and students-- not only by educating them for lower-paying jobs, but by itself using women for the most demanding and exhausting academic jobs;

-- it exalts the idea of a rigid hierarchy, one which excludes women, children, and people of color from its ranks;

-- it employs a deliberately obscure and exclusive language to communicate its work;

-- it further belittles the "feminine" profession of teaching by constantly undermining the importance of both women and teaching in its structure;

-- it actively discourages attitudes that question or attempt to reform-- that is, the revitalizing effects of both comedy and feminism are deliberately deflected.

Depressing stuff indeed. In fact, my little list strikes me as much like the long and terrible list of the crimes of the King in the Declaration of Independence:

> He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public Good .... called together Legislative Bodies ... for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into Compliance with his Measures .... made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the Tenure of their offices, and the Amount and Payment of their Salaries .... sent hither Swarms of Officers to harass our People, and eat out their Substance.

(What feminist graduate student can't identify with being fatigued into compliance? Or being dependent on someone else's good will for your salary? Or having your substance eaten out?)

My Introduction mentioned that, at times, this would read like a manifesto; here, again, I advocate a revolution for the same reasons the writers of the Declaration called themselves "free and independent states" -- the change is necessary. Or, to put it in a different way:

> A system of ideas that aims to protect a series of established interests and values has an entirely different dynamic from one which aims to open up new areas. The former will tend to preserve, the latter to seek change. (Florence 197)

Seeking change: enough complaining, explaining, statistics; as the Superstore says in a slightly different context, SOMETHING *CAN* BE DONE.

> The continued existence of literary education today ... is part of a vital struggle against the deadening force of bureaucracy and rational manipulation, part of a desperate effort to keep alive questions of ends and meanings. *It is a paradox, and also a constant danger, that this struggle must go on largely within the framework of bureaucratic and routinizing educational systems and institutions.* (Gossman 363, my emph.)

A comic stance can ward off this constant danger. Linked as it is with the "lower," the mother-tongue, the language of the people ("Find out new ways of approaching 'the public'; single it into separate people instead of massing it into one monster, gross in body, feeble in mind" [*3G* 113]), an irreverent stance to traditional education has echoes of Woolf's Society of Outsiders. Woolf advises "ridicule and chastity" (115) as the best ways of protecting culture and intellectual liberty--in practice as well as in opinion.

> ... **if we practice the professions *in the same way*, shall we not be just as possessive, just as jealous, just as pugnacious, just as positive to the verdict of God, Nature, Law, and Property as these gentlemen are now?** (*3G* 77, my emph.)

Bakhtin discusses the ways in which Rabelaisian comedy is more "democratic," partly because it defies the usual literary norms and canons dominant in the sixteenth century and still prevailing now. The use and rehabilitation of Rabelaisian images, perhaps their study in literary courses, would go a long way toward opening up the present system:

> No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook. (2)

Most teachers have a memory of a class that clicked, that had good chemistry, that had energy. In my experience, many times these classes had the ice (the mold?) broken by the teacher's comic and open approach.

Judith Stitzel writes of comic elements in Doris Lessing's work:

> Laughter and humor do not necessarily inhibit growth. In The Act of Creation, Arthur Koestler treats humor as creative activity: it shares with artistic and scientific creation that basic element of discovery through juxtaposition of previously separated contexts. Being able to see things simultaneously in more than one way -- this is the simplest way to explain what we need in order to be able to see something new. Lessing knows this and calls attention to the important role that Nusrudin "jokes" play in Sufi literature. These "'jokes' [are] deliberately created to inculcate Sufic thinking, to outwit the Old Villain, which is a name for the patterns of conditioned thinking which form the prison in which we all live." (65; quoting Lessing in New York Times Book Review May 7, 1972: 42)

These patterns of conditioned thinking are important in Spark's Memento Mori. Alec Warner is a professional sociologist. Like Pieixoto, he values detachment and scholarly objectivity. Since turning seventy, Old Age has become his study.

> Nearly ten years of inquisitive work had gone into the card indexes and files encased in two oak cabinets, one on either side of the window. His approach to the subject was unique ... (51)

It is indeed unique; he chronicles thoroughly his meeting with friends and his observations on their behavior: "Charmian's memory is not completely gone; it is only erratic" (52), methodically analyzing events for his case-histories. He has a young friend who informs him about the doings of her elderly male friends: "[Olive] watch[ed] the old veined hand moving its pen steadily, in tiny writing, over the page" (81). He visits a night watchman:

> He hoped to get sufficient answers to construct a history. "How old are you? Where do you live? What do you eat? Do you believe in God? Any religion? Did you ever go in for sport? How do you get on with your wife? How old is she? Who? What? Why? How do you feel?" (54)

When events occur to upset him, he takes his pulse and chronicles his reactions in a notebook. Although his self-possession is remarkable, it is also pathetic. On the way home from a "fruitful though exhausting day ..., he ruminated on the question, why scientific observation differed from humane observation and how the same people observed in these respective senses, actually seemed to be different people" (186). Instead of reacting with fear or horror or laughter to the "Remember you must die" phone calls, he carefully and scientifically notes his reaction.

The fire which consumes his entire notes and records makes him feel "that he was really dead, since his records had ceased to exist" (189). Like Pieixoto, who trusts recorded "facts" over interpretations, Alec's attempt to understand the irrational-- old age and death-- is doomed to failure. His determination to "name, label, analyze" (Little 118) can never be entirely successful. This "official" and scholarly view of capricious death (and life) is diametrically opposed to the laughter of carnival, which demands "ever changing, playful, undefined forms" (Bakhtin 11).

The novelist Charmian Colson learns the importance of laughter in the face of death. Like Mrs. Dalloway's celebrations against war, constrictions and narrowness, Charmian's reply to the telephone caller is cheerful and defiant: "Oh, as to [death], for the past thirty years and more I have thought of it from time to time ... "(109), and then makes herself a ceremonial tea, feeling "strong and fearless" (110). Her playfulness gives her strength of a kind unknown to Alec Warner. Bakhtin notes that in Rabelaisian or folk-culture images of death, there were no tragic or terrifying overtones-- death was viewed as a necessary link to the other side, birth (407).

Several of Pym's characters also model their behaviors to an extent on academic constructs. Jane, of Jane and Prudence, bases much of her expectations of parish life on Victorian novels, feeling "like a character in a novel by Mrs Henry Wood" (128) when eavesdropping on a church meeting, for example. She belongs to a literary society and still attends its meetings at a house "with vague literary associations, for it was next door to what once had been the residence of one of the lesser Victorian poets" (131). But instead of using the occasion for worshipping the important guests, a distinguished critic and a beautiful young male poet, Jane studies the crowd. That is, she "educates" herself in a way not expected by the event's organizers.

> "This seems a good time to leave," said Jane. "The last impression will have been good-- one woman rendering homage to a poet and the other mopping spilt coffee from the trousers of a critic. Things like that aren't as trivial as you might think." (135)

Pym's amateur anthropologists have an odd way of seeing everyday events as extraordinary. I think it is this angle on events-- the attempt to imagine how someone else would see them-- that is feminist, and possibly holds out hope for feminist and comic education.

Such education doesn't always constitute book-learning, but instead brings about a comic questioning of academic and religious structures:

> With the caricature, the raillery, the satire and irony, the apt or devastating quote from English poetry ... comes an introspective realism edged with hard wit. Insights gathered about the nature of male-female relationships brush painfully close to things as they are .... Yet, observing the mating and near-mating going on around them, excellent women still manage to bear the brunt of introspection and insight with bemused detachment. (Graham 45)

Questioning is synonymous with doubting. The "authority of experience" gained by Pym's women ensures that characters like Mildred and Prudence will doubt the institution of marriage. Like Emma Howick, Pym's only professionally trained anthropologist, they acknowledge "the necessity of being on the outside looking in" (Leaves 20).

Jane's visceral reactions to poetry and literature are, throughout Jane and Prudence, "opposed to academic ambition and the production of dissertations" (Cotsell 63). Like Bogus' identification with his thesis characters and the eruption of a classroom into experience, Pym's characters test the truths (or the uses) of presented knowledge. Patricia Kane characterizes Pym's women as having "a curious eye," but this could be more accurately described as "a questioning gaze." It is the ability of Mildred and Jane and Belinda and others to see everyday events as bizarre. This ability I see as a political attitude, a deliberate choice.

Bogus Trumper learns much about himself in the process of writing a thesis - not the product. (His father says, "With your Ph.D you'll have a profession that's dependable. But every professional man must suffer his training" [WMM 25]). Bogus "suffers" his training, but he also learns to laugh at the seriousness of "badges, orders, and degrees." More than that, he has a sudden vision of communal living, a vision that, while tinged with problems, is revolutionary.

In the film "Fucking Up," he's shown as a self-centered, cold and isolated man. Only after finishing his "education" does he want to return triumphant, like a cured patient, and celebrate with the Rabelaisian "Throgsgafen Day": a ritual of eating, drinking, and sex. Bakhtin writes that Rabelaisian "banquet for the world" imagery is universal. A triumphal feast, it celebrates the victory of life over death and is equivalent to conception and birth. In keeping with this scene, Bogus' Throgsgafen includes an explosion of flesh-- his ex-wife and his present lover, both of whom are nursing mothers, the pregnant Matje, his son, his two best friends and their big dogs. They participate in much good drinking and bad pool playing in anticipation of the great feast of the next day. The "great houseful of flesh" awakening at the end of the novel-- an image of which Rabelais would be proud-- makes Bogus smile.

As I mentioned earlier, comparisons between the laughter of learning something new and psychoanalysis are striking: "Psychoanalysis ... demands a new mode of learning, if only because it involves a different temporal experience of learning. It proceeds instead through 'breakthroughs, leaps, discontinuities, regressions and deferred action" (Penley 134 quoting Felman). This way of teaching and learning contradicts the traditional method of an orderly, directed, stair-stepped approach; not incidentally, much feminist writing and psychoanalytic writing question our concept of the unified subject.

To juxtapose two ideas that may be equally true, or to contrast "the disparity between the ideal and the real" is to for a moment step outside structures; thus suspended (out on a limb?) it's possible to attain a new way of seeing.

In the novels I've been discussing, laughter indeed becomes an antidote for dominance. The comic stance is a political one; characters in these novels behave in Woolf's refusing, derisive way in relation to traditional methods of teaching and learning. More radically, however, the usual way of acquiring knowledge (Althusser's educational ISA, which functions through dominant ideology and violence) is supplanted by beneficial, "educational" laughter. Offred has a "birth in mirth," where laughter frees her. Surely the same can happen to us.

Richard Marius, on the "new-look" PMLA:

> ... there on the January issue was a new design and even (gasp) a photograph! I walked back to my office holding January in my hands and looking at it like a desert father seeing his first snow cone. I read a couple of articles; I tucked the issue into my bike bag to bring home with me. I had never done such a thing before. Then another astonishing surprise: on page 98 there is an article by Kimberly W. Benston, called, "Facing Tradition: Revisonary Scenes in African American Literature"-- and it begins with a joke! I read the joke, laughed aloud, perceived its relation to the serious article that comes after, and read the article to the end. I thought to myself, "My God! Maybe there's hope for us yet." (31)

CHAPTER TWO

THE CHURCH

> The influence of religion upon women's education, one way or another, can scarcely be overestimated. (Woolf 3G fn. 20, p. 24)

> By criticizing religion they would attempt to free the religious spirit from its present servitude and would help, if need be, to create a new religion based it might well be upon the New Testament, but, it might well be, very different from the religion now erected upon that basis .... elasticity is essential. (Woolf 3G 130)

Woolf makes explicit the connection between religion and education when she quotes a woman seeking education: "I was told that the desire for learning in women was against the will of God" (fn. 20 to p. 24). Woolf tells the story of Mary Astell, who attempted to found a women's college. A bishop prevents an anonymous donor from giving ten thousand pounds. Woolf comments:

> [Education] is good if produces a belief in the Church of England, bad if it produces a belief in the Church of Rome; it is good for one sex and for some professions, but bad for another sex and for another profession. (26)

Women's exclusion from both institutions ensures a certain monochromatic coloring of the walls of the structures: comedy can be one way of attempting to change this.

It was difficult for me to untangle the threads of this chapter on religion and its derision at the hands of feminist comedy. Despite my neat and numbered plan for writing, I kept "spinning off" on other matters: somehow Lot's wife led to Mother Teresa, who led to woman-as-other, who led to Judgment Day ....[1]

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[1] As discussed in the previous chapter, masculinist theories of literature, particularly comic literature, insist upon a thorough,

And so I found myself trying to make sharp, focused and linear what is blurred and swirling: a process that needs a name. This unsuccessful "sorting out" could be a sort of centrifuge-- to separate substances of different densities [a stone whirled about on the end of the string exerts centrifugal force on the string]. In the same way, this "whirling away from a central axis" should attempt to divide and separate, to be finished, to be clean and neat. (Ah, those housekeeping metaphors.) But my process is, to borrow a term from Nicole Brossard, still "spinning." Objective definitions of the different substances are difficult to make (so much for the house-building metaphor of Chapter One). It proved dishonest of me to claim that I could divide up religion as a topic and objectively discuss co-opted women as somehow separate from, or unrelated to, the "erasure" of women's experience in Western religion, for example, or to leave unacknowledged my own grounding in a conservative church. All of these things are connected, embedded, and so ingrained in everyday life that trying to differentiate them is nearly impossible. My own experience with religion kept

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rigidly disciplined split between private and public voices. This can be summed up in the statement that "... feminism is a social issue; the classroom, however, is removed from society" (Bauer 385). The preoccupation with "neatness" in the classroom, discussed in Chapter One, is only a reflection of the larger society's insistence upon oppositional thinking. Perhaps this is why feminism has been criticized as too open, porous, and undefined. As Levine observes, feminism cannot be applied selectively:

> One of the problems with feminism is that it's not neat .... sometimes I get the feeling that nearly everything is connected. And so when Barbara Harrison, in the midst of talking about schoolbooks, suddenly takes off in flight and impales Joan Didion on the illogic of her argument, I understand the seeming digression viscerally. (43)

Nina Auerbach states, "The best of our writing is entangled in the messiness of our experience" (Bauer 385).

intruding: church camp, Bible school, my ability to locate any Bible verse with amazing speed (thanks to prizes awarded in "J.O.Y.-- Jesus, Others, and You"-- class for winning "Sword Drills"), and my own break with the Baptist church when I wouldn't promise to obey in the wedding service. I can't claim scholarly detachment from something so internalized, but I will try to find some of the basic tenets of religion and show how they are turned upside down and twisted around by feminist comedy. In this chapter I'll identify some of the religious tenets focused on by my authors. Atwood, Irving, Pym and Spark, in varying degrees, use religious orthodoxy as a subject for comic exploration.

In this chapter I want to consider some of the "imagery and values" of mainstream Christian ideology[2] embedded in society. These values and expectations are mocked by my authors, both through their patently Christian characters (ministers, faithful parish workers) and those unwittingly, unwillingly influenced by this ideology-- some of whom protest its constrictions through comedy.

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[2] The most important tenet of mainstream Christian ideology, for my purposes, is the paternal image of God; Mary Daly labels this the "conceptual system of theology and ethics produced by males which tend to serve the interests of sexism" (4). Superiority, particularly of "a single divine incarnation in a male human being" (71) is intrinsic to Christian ideology. The notion of a single male entity as authority is essential, and relates to ideas of the autonomous subject which will be discussed in the next chapter. Besides "single-minded" male superiority, mainstream Christianity perpetuates other ideas mocked by revolutionary feminism: reliance on fear and power to ensure "good" behavior, the necessity of female sacrifice, the stereotype of female temptresses, and a rigid split between the "female" flesh and the "male" spirit. These cornerstones of Christian faith will be discussed in more detail in the body of the text.

> It is unlikely that the sexual caste system could survive in a society that did not manufacture an unimpeachable source of authority to justify its existence. The oldest such authority is religion. (Andreas quoted in Little 13)

In these texts, as in "real life," the line between formal religion as "unimpeachable source of authority" and the effects of using this authority can hardly be distinguished: which are causes and which are effects? Is the Eve story of woman as temptress, sinner, and dark side the beginning of our separation of the sexes, or only one symbol of something further back in time? This problem of separation connects up with the Rabelaisian idea of incompletion, blurriness, openness[3]; it's impossible to choose an arbitrary starting point and follow it sternly, with no deviation from plan, like Mr. Ramsay with his orderly A-Z thoughts. As in my chapter on the academy, I want to show how and why women have been excluded from the church, how their experience is devalued. I'd like to show how these exclusions derived from religion and are inspired by, indebted to or demanded by the church, and how they are mirrored in social institutions like marriage, the family, and attitudes to aging, disintegration and death. These attitudes are so ingrained and so closely followed that they have the force of religious authority:

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[3] Feminist comedy relies on this concept of incompletion (as well as porosity, blurriness, and extravagance). While incompletion may seem to go hand in hand with religious concepts of "world without end," it is important to note that many feminist and comic ideas of incompletion have at their center a concept of identity, and the world, that is shifting, changing, and multifaceted. In Christianity, on the other hand, immortality is achieved through good works, prayer, confession, or being spiritually "born-again"-- depending upon the particular belief system. Achieving such perfection is a pinnacle, a peak. Feminist comedy, like the female body, "goes around in circles."

> ... ideological reinforcement of [male religious] domination has contributed in no small part to the tragedy that has often been women's history. (Hill Rigney 3)

I want to discuss how these works of feminist comedy mock such norms of belief and behavior, and suggest some of the spiritual possibilities of irreverent laughter.

To exorcise demons as ridiculous is not easy. [Hart in Bold 39] (The patriarchal God is loving, but he is also jealous: like the possessive boyfriends in high school, he demands absolute fidelity. He is sometimes a blackmailer[4]; at least, Oral Roberts saw him that way: send me money, or God will kill me. It's difficult to see someone this demanding as silly.)

> Christianity reflects the imagery and values "most advantageous to the men of the patriarchal society for whom it was enunciated and projected; with the retreat of religious belief, a consumer society, wherein men achieve a secular immortality through control of capital and of women, became in fact the new religion." (Figes quoted in Little 13)

(Notes on the new religion: December 7, 1989)

As I sit down to begin writing this chapter, my scholarly training tells me to push aside the thing that's uppermost in my mind: not my chapter, not Christmas or money or marking exams, but the Montreal killings.[5] A good scholar would shove away those images, or manage to detach them, make them scientific, sociological, legal, after, and only after, waiting until all the information comes in via solemn CBC, soul-searching CTV. But this thesis, like Woolf's writing, "is personal and sounds unscholarly" (Russ 75) and so I reject the persona of scholar right now. Too many things are rushing through my mind:

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[4] Daly examines religion's portrayal of essential femininity as depicted in the story of the Fall: the Other is guilty, guilty of curiosity or of over-enjoying life (46). She is condemned to remember her guilt always, and so is destined to serve the male.

[5] On December 6, 1989, Marc Lepine entered a classroom at Montreal's Ecole Polytechnique, separated the women and men, and then shot and killed fourteen women engineering students. His suicide note, recently published, makes clear that he wished to single out feminists as his targets: he wrote that feminists had ruined his life and brought about his plan "to put an end to these viragoes."

-- what good, what good will my writing on feminist comedy do? What power has laughter against a loaded gun?

-- last night, an analysis of the killings followed coverage of the Miss Universe pageant: "Tina has blonde hair, green eyes, and stands 5'8," juxtaposed against, on other channels, women's bodies on stretchers and mothers screaming for their daughters.

-- I don't know if I can stand the inevitable pompous self-justifying analysis that is bound to follow: expert panels solemnly explaining that the man had a long history of psychopathic behavior; he was badly treated by women; things that skirt the edge of blaming-the-victims: did they ask for it by daring to be women engineers?

-- horribly fascinated by reading The Bridge, the engineering students' newspaper at the U. of A.-- in my ivory tower, I'd almost forgotten there were people like this-- racist, sexist, homophobic-- those labels, again, are too scientific. These engineers excel at hating-- anyone different, anomalous: homosexuals, women mayors, socialists. Somehow this is tied in with what happened last night-- this explosion of hate.

-- and in a university, a place again where I've felt safer than any other institution-- that has the appearance of equality, that makes us feel better than almost anywhere else (which, of course, is not saying a lot).[6]

-- and what exactly do you do in a situation like this? I always knew it was dangerous to be a feminist-- but I had no idea how dangerous. It's like the feeling in The Handmaid's Tale when she loses her job-- that it's her fault somehow. There's the impulse to go to church,[7] to sit endlessly in front of the TV, to pace around, to double-lock the doors.

-- this incident seems to crystallize so many things that have been happening the last few days: Time's cover story on women facing the 90s, the responses to it in various newspapers and magazines, Barbara Bush saying you can't be President and a mother too, a man receiving a suspended sentence on a molestation charge because his three-year-old victim was "sexually aggressive,"[8] and my own reading about women's exclusion from mainstream religion, Woolf's hatred and fear of war, Christianity's celebration of a warlike, punishing God, all to the latest media backlash against feminism (the "failed revolution") and "feminist" being a dirty word, a curse.

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[6] Four months after writing this, I received this comment on a student evaluation: "Feminist bitch who should be shot."

[7] Emily Dickinson writes "After great pain, a formal feeling comes," and perhaps this explains the necessity feminists felt, after the Montreal killings, to take part in a ceremony of some kind. Ritual, as Peter Berger notes, is essentially a memory; religious ritual is "a crucial instrument of this process of 'reminding'" (quoted in Daly 142). Many feminist or gender studies courses focus on remembering: remembering forgotten women, their experiences, and their victimization.

[8] The judge that pronounced this sentence is still on the bench as of this writing. In February 1990, the Canadian Judicial Council refused to remove Judge Peter van der Hoop, saying that he was guilty only of "an unfortunate choice of words." "The child's confessed sexual abuser, Delbert Leeson, is free to continue his former job-- baby-sitting" (Ms. [July-Aug. 1990], 10).

-- so how can I calmly sit and footnote? This is an event straight out of The World According to Garp-- violence erupting where it's least expected-- a seminar paper being given, people shuffling their feet, the Christmas decorations up-- and then the blank white looks on the survivors' faces. People will cluck, say it's an isolated incident, no need for fear, girls, the gunman's dead. But he only took seriously what his society told him; in exaggerated form, he acted out what is legally and morally sanctioned.

So: I'm not sure, honestly, where to begin-- everything seems so tangled up: dead students, Time's woman clutching baby and briefcase, the man saying that feminists had ruined his life. Ironically, I jotted this down a few weeks ago in making notes for this chapter: "female as Other, as dark side, uncleanness."

Divide and Disappear: Lilith's Daughters and Lot's Wife

> His son clutches his hand, his crippled father clings to his back, three male generations leave the burning city. The wife, lost. Got lost in burning. No one knows what happened to her .... (Blau DuPlessis 259)

We are not to look back-- ever. We are punished for doing so-- like Lot's wife, in religion we are denied names, our experience is ignored, somehow we disappear. (Childhood chant, post-Sunday school: "MRS. LOT IS A PILLAR OF SALT!")

Why did we disappear? God created them male and female; Eve was there, wasn't she? But Adam was the one given the power of naming the animals; he was allowed to narrow, pin down, constrict. Ownership.[9]

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[9] Daly writes, "Women have had the power of naming stolen from us .... To exist humanly is to name the self, the world and God" (8; orig. emph.). Naming, as an exercise in power, is somewhat troubling: naming implies all the old, religion-inspired labels of Virgin, Whore, Mother and so on.

Ursula K. Le Guin's parable, "She Unnames Them," focuses on just this idea. Animals are unnamed; their names given "back to the people to whom-- as they put it-- they belonged." Once names are taken away, all creatures feel closer to one another: "the hunter could not be told from the hunted, nor the eater from the food." The storyteller realizes that she cannot exempt herself from namelessness:

> I resolutely put anxiety away, went to Adam, and said,"You and your father lent me this-- gave it to me, actually. It's been really useful, but it doesn't exactly seem to fit very well lately. But thanks very much! It's really been very useful."

She can no longer chatter away, taking words for granted; words must slowly and painfully change to reflect her new way of seeing. Adam and his father are handed back the names, which were only borrowed labels and not true identities.

Le Guin's narrator is able to envision a time when names do not stand "between myself and them like a clear barrier." In religion, however, Adam and his father are still in control. Religious imagery, as Judy Little observes, reinforces this role dichotomy: in sacred art, Madonnas comfort and worship their infant sons (18). Mother Teresa calls herself "a little pencil in [God's] hand"-- ironically enough, in the same issue of Time that focused on women in the 1990s [Dec. 4, 1989]). The "last obedient woman" (Harrington 98) says of herself, "I think God wants to show his greatness by using nothingness." The confrontation of "nothingness," of self-negation and victimization, has been closely examined by feminist scholars. Self-hatred and humility is a "uniquely female form of sin" (Christ 20);[10] however, Daly and Christ explore how such blankness can be used as a starting point for transformation, how madness or nothingness can be a beginning-- bare ground for building one's house.[11] Mother Teresa and other conservative women, on the other

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[10] Self-hatred and humility, Charlotte Davis Kasl suggests, is at the heart of many popular twelve-step programs aimed at recovery from drug addiction, alcoholism, incest, gambling and other problems. These

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programs are designed to "break down an overinflated ego and put reliance on an all-powerful male God" (30), through steps such as admitting one's powerlessness over an addiction, the acknowledgment of a higher power, and a relinquishing of "our will and our lives over to the care of God ..." (30), as well as admission of guilt and wrongdoings. Davis Kasl, like Hill Rigney, analyzes such guilt as a cause, not a cure, for mental illness and addiction among women, noting that religion's reliance on a male god, fearsome in his physical power, becomes internalized as "conscience," "tradition" (Hill Rigney, Lilith 5), or, I would suggest, guilt.

[11] Carol Christ, an influential writer on women's spirituality, notes that women's spiritual quests often begin in an experience of nothingness, because female heroes are then led to reject conventional solutions to problems. Atwood's Surfacing is a good example of such a text, since the narrator uses her experience in the "heart of the darkness" to achieve a spiritual transformation.

It would be incorrect to suggest that all blankness indicates vapidity. Gubar analyzes Isak Dinesen's story, "The Blank Page," in which an anonymous woman defies the convention of public display of blood-stained wedding night sheets. Framed for display is a rebelliously white sheet. Gubar's "'The Blank Page' and Issues of Female Creativity" shows how blankness can be an "act of resistance" (305), an alternative to "scripts" presented to women throughout history. Many jokes rely on just such a disappointment or a lack of fulfillment for their humor. The Dinesen story is, in a sense, comic: the solemn drama and expectations generated by the ceremony of blood-markings is defied, rebelled against, and disappointed. Speculation about the rebel's identity is a creative and freeing activity. Significantly, Gubar uses Rabelaisian imagery to describe the subversion in Dinesen's story:

> Members of this 'blithe sisterhood' thus preserve the history of lesser lives in the blood-markings and glorify the blank page as a sacred space consecrated to female creativity, thereby pulling heaven down to earth. (307)

This policy of resistance is not unlike Woolf's belief in indifference (explained in Three Guineas)-- a sort of active passivity, shown in her "passive experiment" of women dropping out from church. In Dinesen's story, the blank page stands for "female inner space ... readiness for inspiration and creation, the self conceived and dedicated to its own potential divinity" (307). The story takes place in a religious community, and inspires Gubar's analysis of nineteenth and twentieth century women writers' revisionary theology.

For a woman, the risk is that when patriarchal definitions of her hand, revel in the nothingness, in the "ecstasy of abasement":

> What we prayed for was emptiness, so we would be worthy to be filled: with grace, with love, with self-denial, semen and babies.
>
> Oh God, King of the universe, thank you for not creating me a man.
>
> Oh God, obliterate me. Make me fruitful. Mortify my flesh, that I may be multiplied. Let me be fulfilled ... (HT 182; ellipsis Atwood's)

The selfless Handmaids are Woolf's Angels in the House transplanted to Gilead. Like the Angel, the Handmaid has "no story of her own." She is "an ideal ... a model of selflessness and of purity of heart" (Gilbert and Gubar 22). Gilead's power structure attempts to dissolve all images of the past through renaming or erasing places, identities, and roles. Women's work centers on duties of the Angel in the House: Handmaids, healthy women with viable ovaries, bear children for the elite. Their surrogate motherhood, and their treatment, is justified by selections from the Bible: "[Wives] can hit us, there's Scriptural precedent." (16). Marthas, too old to bear children, cook, clean and shop, while Econowives are assigned to men of lower status who work their way through the ranks.

Offred is indoctrinated, propagandized, trained; yet she is still able to rebel against the demand to obliterate herself. Though she is made officially to lose her past (like Lot's wife, Handmaids are told,

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> being are stripped away, she will be faced with radical freedom; she will have no guidelines to tell her how to act. (Christ 31)

Little's concept of liminality, discussed in Chapter One, also applies here; when outside definitions are removed, women are "betwixt and between," caught at the threshold. However, a distinction needs to be made between a rebellious/refusing and potentially creative blankness and, as Gubar points out, male-defined emptiness or merely being a receptacle. This is much like the crucial difference between a temporary (conservative) carnival and a permanent (radical, revolutionary) state of carnival.

"You can't stay there, you aren't there any more. That's all gone" [203, orig. emph.]), Offred fiercely and rebelliously remembers her old self and the old world; as with Val, whose friends discuss her after her death:

> ... saying nothing obliterates her too. You know, the Greek word for truth-- aletheia-- doesn't mean the opposite of falsehood. It means the opposite of lethe, oblivion. Truth is what is remembered. (French 629)

Offred makes small gestures of defiance at her assignment to one faceless and interchangeable role: when she looks at Angel guards full in the eyes instead of keeping her head modestly down, she acts in accordance with the truth-- what is remembered. These small actions give her "power, power of a dog bone, passive but there." [22] Many writers of dystopian fiction play on this fear of obliteration, the fear that Winston or Moira or Janine will be made into an "it, where none was before" [180]. We fear throughout the novel that Offred will surrender and truly become "a parody of something" (9) a true believer, a real Handmaid. Bruno Bettelheim describes an experience in a concentration camp: a group of naked prisoners, "docile robots," were lined up to enter the gas chamber. The S.S. officer learned that one of the prisoners had been a dancer, and ordered her to dance for him. As she danced, she approached him, seized his gun, and shot him. Immediately she was shot to death, but Bettelheim writes:

> Isn't it probable that despite the grotesque setting in which she danced, dancing made her once again a person. .... Transformed however momentarily, she responded like her old self, destroying the enemy bent on her destruction even if she had to die in the process. (quoted in Friedan 297)

Similarly, Offred's "old self" emerges when she is asked to play Scrabble, an activity from the old life and in keeping with her former job working with words. This appeal to her intelligence, her individuality, wreaks changes in her relationship with the Commander. She begins to answer him sharply, to question him and to behave on equal terms. She remembers; she is not obliterated.

The power of naming contributes to the obliteration of women in this theocracy: as women throughout history have had their fates determined by labels like Virgin, Whore, Mother, Temptress, Witch, Offred's destiny is determined by her name.[12] Dale Spender writes of the names of religion and their influence in structuring our society. God is exclusively a man; with all the talk of fathers and sons, mothers and daughters are shoved aside. She writes:

> ... [the] effect of making the Deity masculine should not be underestimated because it establishes one of the primary categories of our world as a male category. It immediately casts females into a negative position which can be further exploited. (166-7)

Or, as a feminist who was like me, raised a Baptist, writes:

> ... I found no female spokespersons in any decision-making process that really mattered. The women of the church were keepers of the nursery, singers in the choir, leaders of endless circle meetings, teachers of Sunday school, organizers of trips to Baptist summer camp, and bakers of angel bread. (Snodgrass 66)

And yet with me, like Snodgrass, there's guilt at voicing such opinions; one is prone to "passing pangs of Baptist-inspired guilt ... doubts, regrets, and 'I-could-have-told-yous'" (67); the "virtuous woman" syndrome runs deep.

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[12] Joan Delacourt refuses to commit herself to one name: she is variously known as Joan Delacourt, Louisa K. Delacourt, and Joan Foster. Her reluctance to stand still and be named seems to be a refusal to commit herself to a single "core" identity, as is reflected in her fat/thin body, long/short hair and various modes of dress. This succession of identities will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

The power of naming (which Atwood calls the ability to give "aura and charm") was first taken by Adam. Spender traces the male description of the Fall as an early instance of false naming, where male superiority and female inferiority become encoded in language, through names and meanings assigned to them by Bible writers, editors, and translators. I've discussed how Gileadean powers un-named and re-named, particularly Offred (possessive Of-Fred); to the protagonist of _The Handmaid's Tale_, the ability to name goes hand in hand with the ability to destroy. Her husband Luke is able to kill the family cat by "making an it, where none was before"; later Offred realizes this is the secret of survival in Gilead. _Name_ the enemy, and she is yours.

The male God, the God of war, has a prominent place in _Cat's Eye_. Elaine associates God not with being a father, but with very "masculine" imagery: "something huge, hard, inexorable .... a sort of engine" (194). The Smeaths dismiss Catholic worship of a woman as scandalous; Elaine rebelliously decides to pray to the Virgin Mary instead of God.[13] Her vision of Mary saves her life when she falls through the ice of the creek, a vision, finally, of love and shelter. She is tortured by her

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[13] Daly examines the Virgin Mary's place in Catholic and Protestant religion. As in ancient myth, Mary's virginity could symbolize her independence. For Catholic women, Mary could be seen as one who stands alone (83). Protestants, however, tend to view Mary only in relationship to Jesus. Daly parallels this with the different roles of the nun and the minister's wife. Pym's minor parish workers and minister's wives and daughters contrast with Spark's female religious figures, who are generally more powerful and independent, although in a limited sense (nuns, Mothers Superior, or fiercely virginal young women like Joanna Childe in _The Girls of Slender Means_). Daly quotes Henry Adams on the role of Mary in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries:

> The mother alone was human, imperfect, and could love .... The Mother alone could represent whatever was not Unity; whatever was irregular, exceptional, outlawed; and this was the whole human race. (Quoted 131)

"best friends" Cordelia and the fervently religious Grace Smeath, whose mother sanctions their behavior. The two girls tell her to envision "ten stacks of plates," with a stack smashing every time she breaks one of their rules. For a long time she is a passive victim, feeling as if she deserves this treatment. After her vision, she walks away from being the sacrificial lamb, the scapegoat; like Franny, like Offred, she realizes that her oppression was ridiculous.

> "Ten stacks of plates," says Grace. This would once have reduced me. Now I find it silly. .... [The girls] follow along behind me .... I can hear the hatred, but also the need. They need me for this, and I no longer need them. (208)

And then Woolf's word: Elaine is indifferent[14] to her former friends.

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[14] In Three Guineas, Woolf writes of the necessity of complete indifference of educated women to their brothers' interest in war. This policy of disengagement to an opinion "based upon an instinct which is as foreign to her as centuries of tradition and education can make it" (107), is based upon reason-- the analysis of loyalties, and the questioning of automatic loyalties such as patriotism and national superiority. Like Elaine, who begins to question ideas of social and religious superiority, Woolf finds the strategy of indifference and disengagement to be useful attitudes to those who deliberately try to cause pain to others.

Indifference is a close cousin to Woolf's other policy, derision, and has close ties to the revolutionary comedy implicit in her work and the work of many feminist writers. Here derision is not the familiar mockery of the insider to the outsider, but is reversed and made into a female underground or counter-culture, as in Wittig, Marchessault, Brossard and others. In Les Guérillères, Wittig uses "lesbian" as a label to describe someone not emotionally dependent on a man-- she who is an autonomous being. Some of the conventions of the novel also upset expectations and function in an "underground" way, such as the lack of punctuation and the lack of order in the novel's structure. The Lesbian Body relies heavily on medical names because women do not have the language to name their bodies with precision. Marchessault's Lesbian Triptych inverts the negativity toward "breasted creatures" through a section called "Night Cows." Marchessault writes that "my mother is a cow .... but I'm going to transform this cow" (Saga 13). Brossard's The Aerial Letter is "theory with a radical difference" because it is "the inseparable conjunction of emotion, thought, and sensation" (Forsyth, intro. 14). These texts are examples of "writing on the margins."

In an ironic way, marginality is aligned with Victor Turner's reading of religion-- that the ascetic seeker for God, like a social reformer, places herself outside normal social structures (see Little 179). Wylie

Now an outsider, she has cultivated, not coldness, not detachment, but strength. Though her three old friends entice and jeer her, they grow less substantial every day.

Added to this penchant for labeling is the relegation of women to the status of children. Assumption of maturity, "the kind of knowledge that leads to the assessment of responsibility" (Rabkin 6), is not allowed Gileadean women. This is only a logical extension of mainstream thinking which reduces women to "bakers of angel bread" and singers of hymns. Offred is turned back into a child; her true responsibilities or commitments are few. As long as she keeps to the narrow path Gilead demands she walk, she is physically safe. Her government-approved, ready-to-bear body determines her fate completely. Learning would only poison the temple; this is why women are not allowed to read and why the Bible is locked up as an "incendiary device" (83). Offred rebels, but at times she comes perilously close to surrender:

Sypher, in "The Meanings of Comedy," states his belief that the modern hero lives amid irreconcilables which can be encompassed only by religious faith-- or comedy. He stresses that religion and comedy both have paradox and contradiction at their core; he believes that twentieth century life is so ironical and absurd that only religion and comedy can explain (or even encompass) it. In his description of comic catharsis, he labels salutary comedy as a "rite of unmasking," or a mock Mass (218). He also links the comedian to a doubting Thomas, as well as the comedy of faith to "a higher madness" (232). And his final definition of comedy is that it acquires "perspective by incongruity" (254). Writers like Spark and Irving seem to believe that to hold comedy as a faith is to hold religion as a faith, and vice versa. Carried a bit further, this suggests that the true Christian is an outsider because s/he rejects worldly attitudes and advocates freedom from unreal loyalties. This seems especially important when applied to Spark and Pym, whose usually religious female heroes are indifferent and/or derisive to the expectations of others. Phyllis Trible links feminism's characteristics with religious perspectives: "As a critique of culture and faith in light of misogyny, feminism is a prophetic movement, examining the status quo, pronouncing judgment, and calling for repentance" (3).

> Dear God, I think, I will do anything you like. ... I'll empty myself, truly, become a chalice .... I resign my body freely, to the uses of others .... I am abject. (HT 268)

In Joyce Carol Oates' "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?", Connie expresses similar feelings:

> She felt her pounding heart .... She thought for the first time in her life that it was nothing that was hers, that belonged to her, but just a pounding, living thing inside this body that wasn't really hers either. (Oates 353)

The story just quoted takes its title and much of its atmosphere from a horrifying Bible story which centers on the necessity of female sacrifice. A man, his servant, and his concubine are on a long journey. They are desperate to find a place to spend the night, and a stranger asks them, "Where have you come from, and where are you going?" The stranger takes pity on them and offers them his home for the night. As they settle in, two men beat on the door and demand to see the strangers; they want to rape the men in the house. The host offers his daughter, a virgin, as a substitute, but the vandals refuse to listen. The guest "took hold of his concubine and thrust her outside for them. They assaulted her and abused her all night till the morning, and when dawn broke, they let her go." The concubine, at daybreak, crawls to the entrance of the house, and sprawls across the threshold light. When his master sees her, he lifts her on his donkey and they begin the journey home. "When he arrived there, he picked up a knife, and he took hold of his concubine and cut her up limb by limb into twelve pieces; and he sent them the length and breadth of Israel" (Judges 20:29).

Biblical scholar Phyllis Trible, in Texts of Terror, analyzes the story extremely closely, concluding

> Of all the characters in Scripture, she is the least. Appearing at the beginning and close of a story that rapes her, she is alone in a world of men. Neither the other characters nor the narrator recognizes [sic] her humanity. She is property, object, tool, and literary device. Without name, speech, or power, she has no friends to aid her in life or mourn her in death. Passing her back and forth among themselves, the men of Israel have obliterated her totally. (80-81)

Gilbert and Gubar examine Oates' story (along with Jackson's "The Lottery") as an example of the inexorability of female sacrifice, the guilt of the scapegoat; it horrifyingly questions "the logic of a culture whose feminine mystique tells the wife and mother that she must sacrifice herself for her family" (NML 115) while telling the daughter, as "Friend" tells Connie, that there is nothing else "for a girl like you but to be sweet and pretty and give in" (353). Nothingness beckons to Connie, as it beckons to Offred, as it beckons to Elaine. It is this inescapable training that Friedan labeled "progressive dehumanization ... a vacant sleepwalking, playing-a-part quality ...." (271).

> Then God spoke to me and said:
> Here. Take this gingerbread lady
> and put her in your oven.
> When the cow gives blood
> and the Christ is born
> we must all eat sacrifices.
> We must all eat beautiful women.
> (Anne Sexton, "The Author of the Jesus Papers Speaks")

But it is not only in Gilead that such dehumanization and female sacrifice takes place; it is also reality in some radical political movements. Fraulein Fehlgeburt, a political radical and a minor character in Irving's Hotel New Hampshire, is a "waiflike, stuttering, shy university student" (247). She is a perfect victim of quasi-religious fervor. Although the radicals' vision is not "Christian" in belief or action, it is so fervently held that it has the force of religion (in terms of a set of rules to live by). Their devotion to a cause that will create a "totally different planet" (259) has basic similarities to the unshakable beliefs of the Mrs. Smeaths and Aunt Lydias of the world. The radicals believe, too, "that their own bodies were objects easily sacrificed for a cause" (259), which parallels the contempt and disgust for the body (particularly the female body), professed by strongly religious characters of the authors under discussion.

I want to argue, though, that Fehlgeburt's part in the terrorist plan has its roots in Ernst's pornography, which in turn is rooted in the binary or oppositional logic of religion: the role dichotomy, the split between the male head and the female body, with one vastly more valuable ("pleasing" to the authority, whether God, male, or political radical) than the other.

> (A world-famous consultant to beauty pageant contestants, watching his girls practice runway walking: "Put bags over their heads and each is as lovely as the next one.")
>
> (Question asked a baker who specializes in "bikini cakes": "Do you ever give them heads?" Answer, genuinely puzzled: "Why should I do that?")
>
> The entire 'culture' of patriarchy continually generates messages of female filth .... through theology and pornography (Daly 102).

Susan Griffin examines the connection between pornography, terrorism, and theology in Pornography and Silence.[15] The narrator of Hotel New

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[15] Griffin's prose-poem analyzes war, misogyny and other products of what she terms "the pornographic mind," a mind that functions in dichotomies, with no understanding of the ambiguity or inversion necessary for revolutionary comedy. She writes:

> ... Hitler is also obsessed with the idea that he has been humiliated by Jews. He tells us, in fact, that the Jews make fun of Aryan culture. The Jew ridicules religion, he says, and the Jew scoffs at German history, and the Jewish intellectual has mocked even himself. Thus his plan to annihilate the Jew is a pledge to stop this Jewish laughter. (179)

Hampshire, John, similarly realizes that a terrorist is just another version of a pornographer: "The ends, they say, are what they care about. But they are both lying. Ernst loved his pornography; Ernst worshiped the means .... The terrorist and the pornographer are in it for the means .... Their intellectual detachment is a fraud; their indifference is feigned. They both tell lies about having 'higher purposes'" (339).

Fehlgeburt, like Offred, is beckoned by the feminine ideal: self-sacrifice, nothingness. Like Elaine, who has an impulse to give in-- to go through the wringer and come out "flat, neat, completed ..." (130), Fehlgeburt begins to believe that she is nothing, something her culture has whispered to her all along. She does everything in a detached manner, uninterestedly; she is so thin and bloodless that it is as if "all the books in her room had been feeding on her, had consumed-- not nourished-- her." (298) Ernst the pornographer chooses her to be the one to drive the bomb; she is told that she's the most expendable.

> She shrugged .... This was not quite a human movement; it was less a twitch than it was a kind of electrical pulsation .... It was a nobody-home sign .... It was a tick of a clock, or of a time bomb. (301)

John relates this pornographic mindlessness of terrorism, as Griffin does, to Nazism and "true believers." The belief that human beings are expendable, and the necessity of (usually female) martyrdom and sacrifice, are also central concerns in Spark's novels and in The Handmaid's Tale. Unlike Hotel New Hampshire's Freud and the dancer in the Bettelheim story, who die (as Irving says of Freud) "in a combative way .... he can actually take somebody with him" (Miller 195), Fehlgeburt's death is only an extension of her disembodiment. She could be seen as an angel in the house of politics. That is, she sacrifices herself for "her man," the radical movement. "At times ... in the severity of her selflessness, as well as in the extremity of her alienation from ordinary fleshly life, this nineteenth-century angel-woman becomes not just a memento of otherness [but] ... an 'Angel of Death'" (Gilbert and Gubar, Madwoman 24). Robin Morgan writes, "Just as the structure of the male corporate world is the means for a woman to rise in our economy (playing the game by his rules), so is the structure of a male revolution the means for a woman to rebel (overthrowing the rules by playing his game)" (71). Fehlgeburt "kills" her own desires and her own self in the hope of achieving "eternal life" as a heroine of the radical movement. As the chosen driver of the car bomb, she will kill not only herself but many others: "'Everyone will be involved,' she said ominously. 'It has to involve everyone, or it's no good,' she said, and [John] heard [the group's leader's] voice behind hers, or Ernst's all-embracing logic" (299). Later she explains that another radical is not trustworthy because he "thinks of his own survival."

"'That's bad,?' [John] asked her ....

'At this phase, that's bad,' Fehlgeburt said" (300).

Morgan ("I know these women. I was one of them.") tells the story of a 32-year-old chambermaid whose Libyan lover planted a high-powered plastique bomb in her luggage when she left London for Tel Aviv.

> ... we cannot so easily imagine what goes on in the brain of ... [a] woman who carries his child under her heart, and who now realizes that he-- knowing these things-- put into her hands what would make of her a weapon, make of her who carries life a walking carrier of death for 400 passengers on an airplane-- and a walking carrier of death for herself, and for their child. (71, orig. emph.)

Morgan tells several other stories about the "feminine behavior" demanded of women in terrorist movements (see her The Demon Lover: On the Sexuality of Terrorism). True to form, Fraulein Fehlgeburt is marvelous at taking directions-- a sentiment repeated by Ernst about Franny.

Franny, of course, is much more complex a character than Fehlgeburt-- and more admirable-- but they are similar in being tempted by sacrifice ("do with me what you will"). Ultimately Franny is able to resist the temptation to surrender her body and her mind to Ernst's propaganda. But as with Offred, we are terribly afraid that she will become a true Handmaid. When Ernst reads his pornography ("not about sex: it was about pain without hope, it was about death without a single good memory" [258]), Susie, John, Frank and Lilly react violently: storming out, throwing things, getting sick, crying. But Franny listens to Ernst's self-justification: "At this phase it is necessary to generate disgust .... I am serving the revolution." John recognizes Franny's attraction to his "touch of evil, that hint of destruction" (259). Ernst's method of revolution is exactly the opposite of a comedian's. He believes that only utter disgust and contempt will serve to tear down the old structures-- only the most repressive and authoritarian leadership will eventually inspire the masses to revolt.[16]

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[16] A feminist comic version of revolution would be to laugh "until the walls come tumbling down." Laughter degrades in a positive sense; it brings down to earth and celebrates the ordinary. A feminist comic stance is liberating and broadening, giving a sense of many possibilities. But Ernst's method demands an oppositional mind. In the context of teaching, particularly the teaching of literature, Olivia Frey examines the adversarial method of acquiring knowledge.

> The shift from 'Professor A has misunderstood' to 'I disagree with Professor A' involves more than just a syntactic change. It is a shift from one view of knowledge to another-- from the Cartesian view that reality is fixed ... to the social

> ... at each turn of her body, at each face or curvature exposed, we see nothing. For there is no person there. No character, no woman recognizable as someone we might know. (Griffin 36, orig. emph.)

Obliteration: the lure of blankness. Irving and Griffin both wrote about terrorism's connection to pornography in 1981, just after the American hostages in Iran were released. Robin Morgan analyzed the connection more fully at the end of the decade:

> The terrorist has been the subliminal idol of an androcentric cultural heritage from prebibilical times to the present. His mystique is the latest version of the Demon Lover. He evokes pity because he lives in death. He emanates sexual power because he represents obliteration. (68)

Later Morgan writes how the terrorist (and by extension the pornographer) lacks a sense of AMBIGUITY. Given the importance in the carnivalesque world of "happy ambiguity" and blurred lines between (for example) the audience and the actors, the lived in and looked at, Morgan's definition is essential to understanding feminist comedy.[17]

> constructionist view that knowledge is created, that people and contexts shape knowledge .... Such a view of knowledge allows for two different views to be right, or partly right, or meaningful at the same time. Without the fearsome burden of exactness we are less likely to feel compelled to beat the other down. (522)

Similarly, feminist revolution in writing and in literature would most likely reflect a political "opening up" to complexities and ambiguities. Frey's comment, of course, applies equally well to other institutions. A shift in religious thinking, from "Catholics have misunderstood God" to "I disagree with Catholics' interpretation of the Bible" would be the first step in changing adversarial thinking in religion.

[17] In a state of carnival, festive license takes place, male/female societal roles are reversed, Church and government are mocked, and the status quo is seemingly upset in what Frye calls the "feast of the ass and the boy bishop" (in Felheim 210). In such a time, serious rituals are mocked, and the people scoff at convention. Here there is a temporary liberation from prevailing truth and order. Bakhtin describes the atmosphere of the folk carnival, saying that "carnival license is festive, communal, universal, ambivalent (both triumphant and mocking)--everyone belongs to it" (12).

Fertility, growth, and abundance are themes of the carnival: plants, Ernst, the Commander, and others like them, are allowed to "call up

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animals, and human are given "fanciful, free, and playful treatment" (18). Bakhtin explores the Rabelaisian effect of carnival-- in its physical manifestations-- as well as in its later, more sober and "respectable" literary guises. It's important to note, however, that in the end the license of carnival is merely temporary. This descent into carnival, as Bamber observes in *Comic Women, Tragic Men*, allows all the thrills of encountering danger and chaos without being made to deal with the consequences of such lawlessness. Institutions may be inverted, but they are eventually set back upright again. The status quo is regained, and is in fact stronger, for the period of license indulged in. Paul Grawe discusses the importance of survival of the social structure in comedy: on twelfth night, servants took the place of their masters, and disrespect to caste and class was allowed. Festive misrule was permitted, but this could continue only for a specified period of time if society were to survive.

Traditionally, authors use the lawlessness of carnival to express horror and revulsion at the prospect of its permanent effects: a blurring of gender divisions, the destruction of rigid institutions, and the anarchy possible in popular rule (see Gilbert and Gubar, *NML*). Bamber indicates the ambivalent nature of such license, saying that the optimistic interpretation of carnival is that "everyday life is clarified and enriched by our holiday from it"-- this is the essentially conservative view taken by authors like Joyce and Eliot. The upholding of male/female roles is so important that temporary departure from such norms is allowable only so long as it is merely transient, as in Philadelphia's annual "Mummers' Parade" on New Year's Day, when women and men trade gender-specific "costumes." Bamber mentions a more radical and pessimistic reading of impermanent license: temporary subversion of the social order shows how high a price we pay for such order.

Classic comedies may temporarily depart from what is normal, usual, and acceptable, but such comedies inevitably end up reaffirming these values. Bamber observes, for example, that while Shakespeare's comedies challenge contemporary limits to sexual equality, the social order is strengthened at the play's end. Bamber observes that the battle of the sexes, as in *The Taming of the Shrew*, as a theme "is inherently sexist. The battle is only funny to those who assume that the status quo is the natural order ... and likely to prevail. To the rest of us, Kate's compromise is distressing."

Similarly, Shakespeare's portraits of festive misrule in *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are fleeting ones; while outsiders are accorded a chance to preside over a "society," it is merely a temporary license. In the societies celebrated and elevated by traditional comedies, the governing ideal is that of order and hierarchy. At (usually officially sanctioned) times, this gives way to radical misrule-- norms are attacked but eventually emerge unscathed, stronger for the "trial by fire."

Traditional comedy, as Aristotle notes, does not have the power to destroy institutions; institutions are instead reinforced. Authors use the carnival to point out the (to them, horrific) implications of license. An indulgence in lawlessness is a relief, an escape, and eventually strengthens the way things are and have always been.

armies, attach electrodes to living flesh, justify the invention, testing and stockpiling of world-destroying weapons" on the basis of good-and-evil, black-and-white distinctions. Eventually they consider the political reasons for these actions as secondary to the doing of them as creative acts [because] ... a lack of ambivalence cannot tolerate complexity or compassion" (69-70).

Marc Lepine: to him nothing was ambivalent, nothing was complex. What did he see as he pulled the trigger? Simple right and simple wrong. Is this what good soldiers see? Ernst, Marc Lepine, the Commander: all saw the "other" and made an "it, where none was before": they made themselves the Gods of Judgment. As in academia, male authority has the weight of "God's authority." It is "objective" and "fair."

Irving, in an interview just after Hotel New Hampshire was published, discussed "decadence" in the Old World (prostitution and its degradation of women) and that of the New World: terrorism. Like Atwood and Spark, Irving sees this decadence ("belief in an idea to the extent that human beings ... are simply expendable") as ultimately religious in feeling and intent: "fascistic in method but vaguely mystical in justification" (Miller 184). Here Irving seems to equate "mystical" with "religious." Religion, as I've discussed it here, is institutionally oriented, while mysticism relies more exclusively on subjectivity or intuition. To use a mystical justification for expending human life, then, is to justify with no reason other than a "gut feeling."

Traditional values-- Church, family, government-- are celebrated in absentia. The election of a king and queen and the parodies of Scriptures only refresh their power over the people. Eventually such indulgence is turned back upright, order is restored, and society returns to normal, the more orderly for a brief period of chaos.

> This above all, to refuse to be a victim. Unless I can do that I can do nothing. I have to recant, give up the old belief that I am powerless and because of it nothing I can do will ever hurt anyone .... withdrawing is no longer possible and the alternative is death. (Atwood, Surfacing 191)

What most of this has been about is the idea of women as victims: Surfacing's narrator and Atwood's characters Rennie, Joan, Offred and Elaine- all are studies of power and the empowerment of women to seize control of their destinies. (1970s remnant, that rather embarrassing and strident label empowerment, seizing control. But it is most accurate-- questions of power: who can do what to whom and get away with it, as Offred observes.)

Irving has said that he is drawn to "the female victim as he reminds us Thomas Hardy was to Tess" (Harter and Thompson 13). He has spoken of Franny as a "cowboy hero who gets her toes shot off and is dragged behind a horse in the opening of the film ..." (Miller 186). Rape is, of course, disturbingly prevalent in Irving's work: like terrorism, like pornography, it is the ultimate violation of humanity, but an almost exclusively "female-as-victim" crime. His most victimized character is Hope Standish, the woman in the novel excerpted in The World According to Garp. She is brutally raped by Oren Rath, and she stabs him to death during the attack. But the "recovery" (if such a brisk, optimistic, convalescent word applies) differs in each novel, evolving from the rape of Utch's mother, which physically kills her, to that of Hope Standish, Ellen James, and the nameless girl in Garp: all are emotionally and, in Ellen's case, physically permanently mutilated. It signifies Irving's evolution of thinking when he describes Franny as the HERO of Hotel New Hampshire, that the novel traces this battered, mutilated cowboy:

> how she puts herself back together again .... But, psychologically, what I'm saying is that you maybe never come to terms with such things or deal with such things, though in another way you have to. (Miller 187)

In other words, Irving goes from a depiction of woman-as-victim, spiritually and physically damaged, to an understanding of the more complex issues involved in the transformation from victim to woman-as-hero. He begins to dwell less on the psychology of rape itself than on a view of a woman capable of "dealing with," or overcoming (again an unsatisfactory word; it is not possible to overcome such injury) this and other attempts to dehumanize, to turn a person into a thing. This affirmation is evident in Atwood's work from the beginning. Elaine, for example, is amazed at her own wellspring of power: "I turn and walk away from her .... I see that I don't have to do what she says .... I can do what I like" (*Cat's Eye* 207).

(I was deeply disturbed yesterday, teaching a first-year class on "My Last Duchess" and "Porphyria's Lover." Several students, all female, believed Porphyria had a beautiful, romantic death-- to die for love is beautiful. An aggressive student-- male-- gave this analysis of the Duke of Ferrara's actions: "Well, he couldn't divorce her, and she was a terrible flirt anyway. He had a life to live, you know." One silver lining: a woman in back who hadn't spoken all year burst out, "She was an OBJECT to him! She was a TROPHY; he collected things. Can't you see that's why he killed her?")

Gatekeepers of the Elect

The idea that outsiders-- women, Jews, nonbelievers-- are not quite human relates to the religious idea of the elect. In the academic world, the value of orthodox thinking is such that outsiders are usually shunted aside-- the notion of academics as "gatekeepers." Our way is the true way; those who are "wrong" are less than human. They deserve suffering, punishment, deserve to die and forever gnash their teeth in hell. What happens to Elaine is "God's punishment .... It serves her right" (Cat's Eye 193). The cruelty of Cordelia and Grace is only another kind of terrorism ("Cordelia, I think. You made me believe I was nothing" [213]); Mrs. Smeath is smug because she "has God all sewed up" (194); like any kind of fanatic-- religious, political-- she believes her judgment will be vindicated in this world or the next. No "happy ambiguity" here.

Jean Brodie: she seems harmless enough; she means well. But Sandy (who should know) says that Miss Brodie has "elected herself the God of Calvin"; she allows herself the power of altering the lives of others. Like a terrorist, like a pornographer, she is able to remain detached from the emotions of those she manipulates. Her girls are assigned roles and their roles are followed through.

But to imply that Jean Brodie is a highly serious villain is wrong. Like Woolf, who believed the technique of constructing Hitler and Mussolini as buffoons was the best way to deal with them, Spark uses ridicule ("satire instead of bombs," as Nicholas says) to exorcize demons. She sees evil as demonic, it is true-- but evil is also silly and worthy of ridicule (Hart 39). Dougal Douglas, the "upsetter" in The Ballad of Peckham Rye, is devilish, but he also resembles the medieval version of the devil: an ambivalent figure who mocks, who expresses the "underground," unofficial point of view. True evil is not glamorous but laughable: Brodie's "transfiguration of the commonplace"-- her attempt to live through her students-- ultimately fails because it is an illegitimate use of power. Sandy eventually realizes Brodie's girls, the private fascisti, parallel Calvin's elect. That is, those who most resemble the "head" (Miss Brodie, in the case of her set) are most assured of reward. It's no coincidence that Alan Bold labels Brodie a "persuasive study of an elitist mentality." The crème de la crème, the set, the fascisti-- they all rise to the top. Yet their rise is not treated with deadly seriousness, but as silly, ridiculous. When Jean Brodie shepherds the girls through the streets, Sandy sees the "set" as "a body with Miss Brodie for the head" (30)-- a reference to Christ at the head of the Church's body. A little later she realizes that "the Brodie set was Miss Brodie's fascisti ... all knit together for her need" (31). When she enters a convent later in life, she recognizes the prevalence of Miss Brodie's way of thinking: the convent contains fascists less agreeable than Miss Brodie.

More on the elect: Gilbert and Gubar note, in The Madwoman in the Attic, that in the nineteenth-century novel, women often police each other as agents of the patriarchy. They explain that in a world like Jane Eyre's "both [female] keepers and prisoners are bound by the same chains," although women like Grace Poole may act as agents of men, with some limited power (351). In Chapter One, I discussed academic women acting as "gatekeepers" of scholarly tradition. As an even more powerful institution, the church also employs women as conservative "Uncle Toms." In The Handmaid's Tale, the Aunts are allowed the most power given to a female: they can train and punish other women.

> Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts.
> No guns though, even they could not be trusted with guns. (4)

They are the "keepers," the shamers, the Grace Pooles of the world, or, on a less literary level, the Phyllis Schlaflys and Mother Teresas. Atwood's portrayal of the Aunts' physical ("phallic") power, the power to police, is only an exaggerated form of other church-sanctioned policing to ensure obedience to standards set by patriarchal religion. Biology, in The Handmaid's Tale, is destiny, as it is in other traditional religions. This destiny is enforced by other women.

> Catholic theologian Daniel C. Maguire has said that 'as long as women in the church confine themselves to picking up the debris of failed social systems and don't analyze and criticize those systems, they are loved and respected.' (Harrington 98)

Thoughts from the Underground: Unofficial Culture

Because religion is structured according to patriarchal rules and priorities, a dualistic split ensues between the mind and the body, the spirit and the flesh. Women are aligned with the body and the earth, the world of nature; man is "higher." In Rabelaisian comedy, this split is denounced, mocked and overturned. Bakhtin observes that in folk festivals, such innovations as elected kings and queens and parodies of Scriptures were commonplace. The second, or unofficial, world celebrated in carnival is the one usually hidden in a classist patriarchal society. The usual images of order and of "right" are inverted:

> ... a child feeding the mother, fish nesting in a tree, an ox slaughtering a man, a child beating the father, an army of women attacking a fortress, a woman bearing arms and standing beside her husband, who is spinning. (Little 5)

These feasts began as church festivals, as officially sanctioned rituals for temporary release from constricting roles and expectations.[18]

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[18] Comic imagery in this sense, as Bakhtin notes, must involve a "rehabilitation of the flesh"-- the body and materiality must be celebrated, not hidden away or regulated. Typical themes are fertility,

In carnival, the body-- all parts of the body-- is deeply positive; it is not separated from other parts of life, but participates in and makes real the activities of conception, birth, growth, sex, aging and death, all continuing, never-filled processes. The Rabelaisian world saw the body as ambiguous, unfinished, open; Bakhtin traces the Renaissance development of the idea of "complete" man, a description that sounds much like today's anorexic fashion model:

> ... its protuberances and offshoots were removed, its convexities (signs of new sprouts and buds) smoothed out, its apertures closed. (29)

Signs of the body's wildness, its refusal to be complete-- conception, pregnancy, birth, death throes-- ceased to be represented in art. They were vulgar; they came to be associated with women, the very old or young, the wild, the animal.[19]

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growth, abundance; the essential principle is degradation-- the lowering of the abstract to the earthy. Bakhtin describes the parodies of official culture which took place in medieval times: parodies of scholarly wisdom and of heroic deeds and romantic tales were common, but his list of liturgical forms parodied in the carnival spirit of openness and license is impressive: the Liturgies of the Drunkards, parodies of the Gospels, of prayers, hymns and psalms (14). The congregation celebrates an "asinine mass," with much braying (78)-- a lovely marriage of humans and animals and laughter.

19. Writing about the body, particularly the female body, can be subversive and comic: Cixous' puns and Wittig's bawdiness and Irigaray's plays on words are funny, direct, and outrageous, calling into question our belief in the literalness of language. For example, the title of Irigaray's This Sex Which Is Not One could mean several different things, as could "And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other." In the latter essay, Irigaray plays with words and symbols of watches, clocks, and mirrors. The translator points out some double meanings in "Tu me/te donnes à manger": "You give me [something] to eat; "You give yourself [something];" and/or "You give me yourself to eat" (fn. to p. 61). "When Our Lips Speak Together" relates genitals and speech. Similarly, Cixous' enigmatic statement that "Women lack lack" and Wittig's direct and erotic language in The Lesbian Body pull the reader up short. Such comic refusal of standard ways of defending ideas are good examples of a feminist and comic stance.

The body and its rhythms, so often in religion solely associated with the female, are a disruption to the rigid calendar of the church. (In orthodox Jewish tradition, menstruating women are not allowed to cross the threshold of the synagogue. Maybe other traditions haven't been that blatant, but I've heard virtually every "male" concern-- war, money, adultery, premarital sex, veiled references to impotence-- under the sun discussed in a sermon; I can't remember once hearing about menstruation, menopause, pregnancy or childbirth, even in Bible classes that existed to discuss "adult issues.") Pregnancy, though it fulfills women's role, also confirms her "earthiness," or carnality; it is visible evidence that she has indulged in the "lower" pleasures of the flesh.[20]

> Margaret Laurence, on being a feminist writer: "When This Side Jordan came out a reviewer said, 'Ho hum, I wonder why Mrs. Laurence felt it necessary to include the obligatory birth scene. And I thought, Good God, birth is a damn sight more interesting than male masturbation." [BIC Feb. 1986]

As Professor Pieixoto says, "If I may be permitted an editorial aside ..." - as of this writing, I'm six and a half months pregnant. Certainly people seem uncomfortable with a pregnant professor, but what amazes me is the almost total lack of thought about biological possibility by my employer: no maternity leave policy, so I'm the departmental precedent-setter. Eyes seem to rest almost palpably on my waistline. I've used the word "pregnant" in conversation with older male colleagues. "Why do they seem so shocked?" I wondered out loud to my Women and Literature class. "Because," said an older student, "they immediately think of how you got that way."

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[20] Actress Demi Moore posed for the cover of the July 1991 issue of Vanity Fair. Many reacted with horror-- because not only was she nude (although with arms strategically placed), but she was eight months pregnant. "Officials with the Food Lion, Winn-Dixie and Harris Teeter chains said they wouldn't allow the issue on their shelves, even though it was wrapped and covered. 'We feel the cover is controversial enough to offend a fair number of our customers,' ... the Vice President of special projects at Food Lion said .... 'We run a family store and cater to families,' [a Winn-Dixie spokesperson] said" (The Daily Jeffersonian [Cambridge, Ohio] July 16, 1991). Apparently family-oriented stores ignore the existence of pregnant women.

Irving plays on the Rabelaisian image of laughing, pregnant hags with the comic grotesque story of Garp's conception. It clearly parodies religion, specifically the "immaculate conception": "Old Virgin Mary Jenny," co-workers say. "Doesn't want a baby the easy way. Why not ask God for one?" (15). Sergeant Garp's death is death that gives birth, and it includes much imagery that is liminal, suggesting the "betweenness" that will characterize so much of Garp's life. Fittingly, Technical Sergeant Garp's instinct, upon being critically wounded and near death, is to masturbate: a Rabelaisian combination of disintegration, death, sex, and rejuvenation. Irving lampoons the religious idea of "rising from the dead," so that the usual boundaries between life and death are suspended. A man with injuries similar to Garp's loses his hair and begins to develop breasts; like Spark's octogenarians, sexual distinctions begin to be erased by the process of physical deterioration. Garp Sr.'s disintegration turns him into a child-- he gradually loses letters from his one-word vocabulary, and daily "seem[s] to grow younger." Jenny imagines him regressing into a fetus, his personality separating, "half of him turning to dreams of an egg, half of him to dreams of sperm. Finally, he simply wouldn't be anymore" (26). This backwards process has the inside-out Rabelaisian pattern. Garp is simultaneously a baby, a father and a dying soldier.[21]

Garp's conception is accomplished to the groans of the dying, to the dreams of a man with kidney trouble who's also missing his intestine and rectum: he dreams that "he was being forced to urinate and defecate ...."(28); again a "bringing down to earth," a lowering. Throughout Jenny's use of Technical Sergeant Garp (almost a reversal of God's use of Mary), the critically wounded use "the language of the marketplace":

> "Shit," [the Vital Organ patient] groaned ....
> "Christ," said the External, softly; his lips were blistered with burns.
> "Goddamn shit!" cried the Vital Organ man.

After Sergeant Garp's orgasm:

> "God!" called the External, being very gentle with the d; his tongue had been burned, too.
> "Piss!" snarled the Vital Organ man. (28)

In an outrageous bit of comedy, Irving gives Jenny an almost religious prescience about the conception: "she had no doubt that the magic had worked" (28).

Bakhtin describes the importance of "degradation" in discussion of the material bodily principle: linked with defecation, copulation, conception, pregnancy and birth, this celebrates the lower stratum of the body; it is "always conceiving" (20) and "always laughing" (22), unfinished, incomplete, "between the acts." After the comic conception, Garp himself goes "back to the womb" assuming a fetal position, taking intravenous feedings that attach him to a sort of umbilical cord. Jenny believes that "the best of him was inside me .... the only way he could go on living" (29).[22]

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21. Sypher captures the Rabelaisian spirit, and ancient attitudes to comedy perfectly when he states that tragedy is a closed, fixed form, but comedy is a "carrying away of death" (218).

> ... in the death of one-cell organisms, no dead body remains. (That is, when the single cell divides into two other organisms, it dies in a sense but also reproduces; there is no departure from life into death.) (Bakhtin 52)

The principle of lowering also links animals with humans. Bakhtin describes some fifteenth-century Roman ornaments: plant, animal, and human forms are interwoven, borderlines are infringed, nothing is complete and everything merges (32). The animal aspect of humanity is recognized and celebrated, mixing and combining hierarchies, so that the narrow and vertical become horizontal (403).[23]

Grotesque images (the "laughing, pregnant hags") contradict the solemn, complete and finished man celebrated in religion-- they instead

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22. Alice Hall Petry writes a brief but provocative comparison of Jenny Fields and Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science. Though Harter and Thompson have noted the similarities between the lives of T.S. Garp and Jesus Christ (including their virginal conceptions, unpopular beliefs, fiercely loyal followers and violent deaths of martyrdom at age 33), Petry instead describes Jenny as a type of savior inspiring adoration among her disciples. Though Petry's article does not connect Jenny's life to feminism specifically (and even unfairly seems to mislabel her a nonfeminist), she does note the religious symbolism used to describe her: Jenny's uniform is "like a holy shield" (Garp 8), her maternal love which "inspired a virtual mariolatry," and the fact that Jenny's followers make pilgrimages for "healing" to the shrine-like house at Dog's Head Harbor (Petry 10). I would go further and say that Irving portrays Jenny's desire for independence as feminist, and, if not "religious," her life is inspirational for others who may have not had the courage to live otherwise. That Jenny's choice to conceive a child is presented in comic and feminist terms makes her a good example of a feminist comic character.

23. Lack of boundaries between animal and human is an important theme in much feminist comedy; Marchessault links women with cows ("breasted creatures"), and Irving's bears have become a trademark, with the circus animals in the Pension Grillparzer much like the folk festivals in Rabelais. Interestingly, Garp's bear-- a real one-- is trained to do "human" things: use the W.C., ride a unicycle, deliver car keys, wear a pinstriped suit. Susie, a "real human," dons a bear suit and walks on all fours. Irving gives us other figures typically of the circus: Lilly the dwarf, Roberta the ex-football-playing transsexual, the man who walks on his hands, a number of characters who belie the clean, complete man we elevate. Other characters also blur the lines between the usual human categories-- Owen Meany, Susie, and Lilly are all "close to the ground."

portray down-to-earth images of "copulation, pregnancy, birth, old age, disintegration, dismemberment"-- nasty business, all of them. (Russo: "taboos around the female body as grotesque [the pregnant body, the aging body, the irregular body] ...." [24]).

> [Bakhtin] considers the culture of modernity to be as austere and bitterly isolating as the official religious culture of the Middle Ages, which he contrasts with the joy and heterogeneity of carnival and the carnivalesque style and spirit. (Russo 218)

All four of my authors celebrate the body to varying degrees, but they also take the tack of Rabelaisian comedy by employing parodies and travesties of Scriptures. They "blaspheme" the social structures of values and beliefs so fervently upheld that they could be seen in some senses as "religious." Little examines contemporary authorities and their attitudes to the body; she sees Freudian psychoanalysts and Madison Avenue advertisers as authorities now comparable to religion, since they promise the achievement of perfection and happiness. Madison Avenue, in fact, strictly upholds taboos about the body: advertisements drill us over and over: deodorize, clean, depilate, smooth-- one should strive for a "finished," "polished" look.

In feminist comedy, transcendence is often achieved through the body-- not in spite of it. In conventional religion we are taught to disregard our bodies: what need of flesh in heaven?

"The dynamics of the jumble sale": Pym's unofficial world

> ... everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. (Bakhtin 10)

Barbara Pym. How can her restrained, careful, and delicate High Anglican comedy compare with Irving's ribald humor or Atwood's "Canadian wry"? Irving, after all, writes about violence, sex, pornography--

wouldn't his coarseness offend a nice little old lady like Pym? While his characters indulge themselves in the religion of comedy or "anti-everything," Pym's characters are devoted members of the Church of England: how can I presume so far as to announce that both lampoon the stuffiness of religion and "that separation between the Church and the people"? (3G 146).

(Here the literary dinner party again: imagine Pym sitting down to dinner with Spark, Irving, and Atwood. Would they say grace?)

All four authors mock what Bakhtin calls "the official": that part of the world that is sanctioned, serious, and finished. They do this through their "feminine" endings, through their willingness to discuss taboo subjects, and through their irreverent laughter at all things stuffy, dry, and respectable. Pym's criticism is subtle. She poses a double world to us: on one level, we see the official, sanctioned, "clean" world. It is a world of self-satisfied men like Henry Hoccleve. These men (a majority of whom are in the upper echelons of the Church or academia) represent and enforce, in Bakhtin's terms, official, feudal, ecclesiastical and political ceremonies (5). Such ceremonies-- often linked to the Church's calendar-- reinforce the hierarchy and the status quo, a "consecration of inequality."

But in Pym's world there is an escape. Like other comic novelists, Pym has a doubleness of vision: beneath this orderly, logical world is an underground. Outside of the straight rows of type are the margins where her characters live.

> **The language of criticism: 'lean, dry, terse, powerful, strong, spare, linear, focused, explosive'— god forbid it should be 'limp'!! But— 'soft, moist, blurred, padded, irregular, going around in circles,' and other descriptions of our bodies— the very** abyss **of aesthetic judgment, danger, the wasteland for artists! (Jaffer quoted in Blau DuPlessis 265, orig. emph.)**

And descriptions of the carnival ritual: not orderly lines of people ranked by merit or by height or distinction, but swirling around. A banquet at a round table, nobody at the head or foot.

> If Nature had meant women to cook, it was said, God would have made carving knives round and with holes in them. (Atwood, Murder in the Dark 32)

This round world of Pym's-- any surprise that it's a women's world almost exclusively?-- this world on the margins is juxtaposed directly with the official, "straight" world. Very often a Pym heroine will experience an official event, usually under the auspices of the Church. Though Belinda or Jane has been led to believe that formal and traditional Church ritual will cleanse the spirit and save the soul, it usually leaves one vaguely dissatisfied. Archdeacon Hoccleve's famous "sermon on the Judgment Day" (STG 102), instead of having the desired effect, sparks boredom, complacency, and mystification ("Whatever it might mean it certainly sounded abusive." [111]).

It is not until that evening, after a dinner party with food, wine, and music, that there was "an atmosphere of peace and contentment" (127). The Harvest Festivals and Evensongs so entrenched in the Church's calendar reveal much about the church hierarchy. A serious social error would be to arrive later than the Lyalls at the parish whist drive. Edward Lyall, the local MP, makes a long speech about "the burden," while Jane has an inner debate on whether politicians or clergymen use the word more. The informal, unsanctioned-- friends at a dinner party, port wine with a neighbor, revelations over tea-- are unofficial celebrations, whose openness and flexibility contrast sharply with the rigid Church rituals.

Pym's women live largely outside the demands of "unreal loyalties." They are outsiders, and honest ones at that. Like Offred, they too live in the margins between the stories-- their underworld gatherings sometimes celebrate their very marginality. They are told what is required to be "happy"-- a husband, children, a career-- and cheerfully ignore this advice. To show unmarried women in their fifties as happy and fulfilled flies in the face of socialization. "Spinsters" are dried-up, frustrated, obsessed (bachelors, however, are something else altogether). For Pym to allow her characters to escape this "inevitable fate" is truly revolutionary.

> ... how are we to spend that sixpence? Think we must .... let us think at baptisms and marriages and funerals. (3G 73)

Ritual: "all great events in this mortal life"

Ritual holds an important place in all religions: traditional dress, chantings, movements, responsive readings; but even more basic than these physical trappings are the concreteness and the rhythm of the church calendar. Throughout Pym's work, the liturgical calendar provides an occasion for derision of the official. In Jane and Prudence, Pym's sneaky comedy is highlighted as the parishioners decorate the church for the Harvest Festival. Miss Doggett compliments playboy Fabian Driver on the marrow he is donating ("It is the biggest one we have had so far") while Miss Morrow scrabbles on the floor among the vegetables (is this a Pym-esque version of "Goblin Market"?). Fabian then grandly presents the marrow to the women:

> Jane felt as if she were assisting at some primitive kind of ritual at whose significance she hardly dared to guess. (33)

We see the "lowering of the abstract to the earthy" once again.

The rhythm and ritual of the Church is, particularly in the writings of Quebec feminists, opposed to the rhythm of a woman's body (for example, Jovette Marchessault in Lesbian Triptych observes that "[The Roman Catholic] liturgical solar calendar looked like a strangler's noose ..." (41), opposing the patriarchal sun against the feminist and feminine moon). Here the patriarchal church is a thief, stealing girls' precious ordinary life, stealing their time, passion, and jouissance. Women are taught by the church their "triple curse": shame awaits women who do not conceive; sin awaits those who do conceive; mothers must bear children in sorrow. Wittig's Les Guérillères similarly protests the Church's ignorance of women's bodies.

> Elizabeth can still see herself, at the age of twelve, writhing on her bed with her first menstrual cramps, nauseated with pain, Auntie Muriel standing over her holding the aspirin bottle out of reach. This is God's punishment. She never said for what. (Atwood, Life Before Man 106, orig. emph.)

My junior-high students in a debate on abortion on demand: if a girl is bad, she deserves whatever she gets: AIDS, VD, a baby. She made her bed, she can lie in it.

In Pym's novels (labeled by Duchene as "High Anglican Comedy"), the rituals and rhythms of the church calendar are mocked subtly and with devastating accuracy. Pym, of course, also attacks the bureaucracy and hierarchy of the Church-- something I'll discuss later-- as well as the hypocrisy indulged in by its highest members. To Pym, the church is a microcosm, a necessary backdrop for comedy-- as the academy is to Spark and Atwood and marriage and the family are to Irving. At times Pym treats Church ritual with deadpan, exaggerated seriousness or mocking concern; then, as with the "marrow incident," something will happen to bring the ritual down to earth. The Bishop of Mbawawa shows off his knowledge of the tribe to which he ministers, showing the congregation a "curiously shaped object," which makes them all giggle: "among primitive people one might find almost anything" (180), Pym wryly observes, and, one could almost hear her adding, also among the "civilized."

Pym's church, like the family and like academia, has a rigid hierarchy: men at the top, often making decisions about issues in which they have no experience, followed by "lesser men" (deacons, assistant professors, very young/old men, men of lower classes or nonwhite backgrounds), followed by women and children. Atwood mocks this propensity in Life Before Man:

> First comes God. Then comes Auntie Muriel and the Queen, with Auntie Muriel having a slight edge. Then come about five members of the Timothy Eaton Memorial Church .... After this there is a large gap. Then white, non-Jewish Canadians, Englishmen, and white, non-Jewish Americans, in that order .... followed by all other human beings on a descending scale, graded according to skin color and religion. Then cockroaches, clothes moths, silverfish and germs .... Then all sexual organs, except those of flowers. (122)

This ranking occurs also in Pym's world, and is subtly mocked by her female characters, women on the outside of a rigid world. In Some Tame Gazelle, religious men are entitled to, and expect, an inordinate amount of fussing and pampering. The pathetic Curate and the Archdeacon are coddled. Count Bianco, a wealthy and exotic character, is not. In Pym's novels immigrant men are on a level with women-- pains are not taken over their egos-- while academics and ministers are treated with kid gloves: "To class an English archdeacon with African priests! Surely that was going too far?" (164).

But it is the priest serving in Africa who provides one of Pym's most comic scenes. Bishop Mbawawa, when giving a talk on his work in Africa, sings a ritual song for his audience. This song is all-purpose for life events: "birth, marriage, death, all the great events in this mortal life have their own form of it" (179). Pym, like Spark, puts such "liminal" or threshold events at the center of her comedy. Events that are solemnized and ritualized in religion-- marriage and death in particular-- are slyly inverted. In Some Tame Gazelle, especially, marriage is an occasion to celebrate and appreciate one's single state. Fertility, in this scene, is presented as a solemn ceremony, but Pym sees its comic potential:

> "This instrument is used particularly in agricultural rites,' explained the Bishop, "where the ceremony of propitiating the earth goddess is carried out."
>
> "Phallic," murmured Edith, nodding her head. "Quite the usual thing."
>
> Fortunately, the Sunday school teachers did not know the word, thought Belinda, or they would most certainly have turned round. (181)

By the Bishop's comments-- and by Edith's earthiness-- Pym deflates pretentious notions about religion and its study in anthropology. Similarly, Offred, during various Gileadean ceremonies, deflates the importance of ritual, in her own mind at least, as she comments ironically upon everything from the smell of the Commander's aftershave to the bedroom decoration. She brings down to earth the pomposity of the conception ritual, calling herself a "prize pig"-- in Rabelaisian terms (by linking herself with an animal) she reveals the true way society sees her.

Through mockery of such ceremonies and festivities, Pym is able to challenge the traditional notion of clergymen as noble and unselfish. Archdeacon Hoccleve gleefully catalogs the discomforts of the room where the Bishop will stay: it's cold, has a bad view, the sheets are worn thin and the mattress is lumpy. He takes pleasure in locking up his own collection of thrillers, and chooses a "suitable selection of books for the bedside table-- a volume of Tillotson's sermons ... Beowulf, the Poems of Mrs Hemans, an old Icelandic grammar, and ... a particularly dull anthropological work." (162) Since he "dislike[d] other members of his calling" (148), he enjoys discomforting them whenever possible.

Pym caustically observes that Hoccleve has very few "priestly" qualities-- his letter announcing a new curate is peevish and condescending, and includes some nasty asides to two ministers he especially dislikes. And Belinda, the innocent, remarks upon the tendency of clergymen to be disagreeable: they "bring out the worst in each other, especially with the season of Peace and Goodwill so near" (202). Clergymen in Pym's world are as mean and as petty as their parishioners; at times, even more so. The rivalry between Father Plowman and Archdeacon is beautifully sketched: Hoccleve "took the opportunity to say a few words of warning to those who intended to go to Midnight Mass at Father Plowman's church ... and pronouncing the word Rome with such horrifying emphasis that many of his hearers were quite alarmed." (201)

Belinda desires fervor, eloquence, and passion in her religion, but, as Harriet says briskly, "Oh, we don't want that kind of thing here." (5) As in Spark, there is a great fear of "making a spectacle," of not being properly detached and passive, in religious experience.

> ... as for faith-- I suppose she takes it for granted that she believes. Yet if the Reverend MacElfrish should suddenly lose his mind and speak of God with anguish or joy, or out of some need should pray with fierce humility as though God had to be there, Mother would be shocked to the core. Luckily, it will never happen. (Laurence 47)

Belinda, on the surface a traditional spinster, wishes early in the novel that she were a Deaconness, "but even a Deaconness was not permitted to celebrate Holy Communion ... whereas in the Nonconformist churches ... women ministers had equal status with men." (7) Pym deftly suggests that the women's small rituals, comforts and gatherings (Clarissa Dalloway's "offerings") mean much more to them than the formal rituals of the church. As the staunchly Anglo-Catholic Mrs. Morris says, "That's all very fine, standing up and talking about the Pope. A lot of us could do that. But who's going to cook the Sunday dinner?" (ExW 24) Mildred keeps a little shelf of cookery and devotional books in her room, "the most comforting bedside reading" (21), suggesting that Pym's women often take equal comfort in ordinary events and the rituals of religion. Mildred and other Pym women also participate in the somehow Rabelaisian world of jumble sales. Bakhtin stresses the continuity of life and the importance of material objects in his analysis of the carnival, so perhaps Mildred's appreciation for the history of objects and the basic connection between all human beings ties in to this "unofficial" ritual. When Mildred is told that the Catholic church is having a sale the next week, she replies, "It's rather nice to think of churches being united through jumble sales. I wonder if the Methodists are having one too?" (ExW 59). Even the objects at the jumble sale take on a comforting, almost human character: an "old velvet coat trimmed with moth-eaten white rabbit, a soiled pink georgette evening dress of the nineteen-twenties ... a mangy fur with mad staring eyes priced at sixpence" (61) are "regulars." The jumble sale provides a chance for food ("Did you get some of my home-made sandwich cake, Father?"), tea ("But we haven't got any tea," she pointed out indignantly), and talk ("The Italians are very forward with women ..." "Pinch your bottom they would before you could say knife," burst out Mrs. Morris). All that gather to help have a "temporary equality" (61); in a

Rabelaisian sense, the parish workers' celebration outside the church is more satisfying than rituals inside it.

The world of Pym's characters is like Bakhtin's "unofficial" second world of comedy: it is hidden and unexplored by mainstream society; this "unofficialness" is one of its greatest strengths. Pym's world is also unusually and intensely female. Margaret Ezell observes, "The communities in Pym's early novels swarm with spinsters, at times resembling the Amazonian society in Cranford, so little impact do men appear to have in their day-to-day running" (456). As I said in my introduction, all four novelists have "the ordinary," the unofficial, as their subjects, a "fanfare for the common," those "less than angels"-- people not celebrated, or usually even noticed, in mainstream fiction.[24]

(The dog barks, the snow shovel scrapes, the phone rings: "Do you have a corkscrew?"-- another underground, unofficial party that is on my mind as I write, another ritual of Christmas, another train of thought broken.)

(Is it right to have a party so soon after the Montreal murders? Mrs. Dalloway-- "death in the middle of my party." In a way, a party is the bravest thing you can do in the face of death: you celebrate life, but also its inevitable end. At parties, we make the extra effort, we smile, we sparkle, I wear absurd clothes and avoid shoptalk; the ritual is there, but not as formal as church. More defiant. What sticks in my mind about parties: my father, on being told by my mother of the result of his medical tests: "Oh, shit, it's cancer. Let's go out to lunch."

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[24] See Chapter One for a brief discussion of "unofficial" language in the teaching of literature, and Chapter Three for more discussion of the ordinary.

He also used his breathing machine to blow up balloons for my sister's birthday party. Is this why we celebrate the end of the old year? Is there something in us that demands a pause, something to mark the occasion?)

Pym mocks clergymen who exaggerate their cares and duties (as Irving and Atwood do with academics). Hoccleve has a constant air of weary dutifulness; his wife Agatha has developed rheumatism "out of self defence." Pym lampoons what Brothers calls "the mythic weight of man's responsibilities." Even the loyal Belinda feels irritated at Hoccleve's complaints "when so many people, women mostly, were going about their household duties ... men would be working too, but somehow their work seemed less important and exhausting." He wanders in great melancholy among the tombstones ("I find the atmosphere so helpful. Looking at these tombs, I am reminded of my own mortality" [83]) and complains about his heavy workload: "too busy to have any luncheon ... So many tiresome things to do" (83).

This is the comic juxtaposition at which Pym excels, where, as Larkin says, "amusement foils more pretentious emotion." Nowhere is the "lived in" and the "looked at" better opposed than in the graveyard scene: the melancholy Archdeacon quotes "Night Thoughts" to an impatient Belinda. The clock strikes, and he immediately abandons his melancholy for tea: "I don't believe there's any cake." Or when Henry screams at his wife for letting moths get into his suit: "It was her duty to see that they didn't" (36). Similarly, while Jane is at a church meeting, she tries very hard to compose herself and to realize God's presence, "but failed as usual, hearing through the silence only Mrs. Glaze running water in the back kitchen to wash up the supper things" (151). Again we see the principle of juxtaposition: the male solemnity and exalted ritual, icy seriousness divorced from everyday life, posed as superior against female matter-of-fact "ordinary" ritual of caretaking. And the esteemed Parochial Church Council does not discuss matters spiritual, but blocked water tanks, taxation of the Easter Offering, and the composition of the parish magazine cover. Belinda and Harriet play the part of "disrupters" or truth-tellers; the Archdeacon attempts to impress his visitors with elaborate choral arrangements no one can sing; his voice wavers on the prayers; and he imposes a Litany on his flock: "Everyone knelt down rather angrily" (107).

Pym also tackles the question of traditional Christian reliance on Judgment Day. When Hoccleve questions the "worthiness" of his congregation, Pym mentions they are "a harmless enough collection of people" (107). Throughout his lengthy and semi-plagiarized speech, the irritation and restlessness of the congregation is traced. Belinda tries to concentrate on her sins, then on the sermon, but instead worries about Sunday dinner ("It would be roasted to a cinder by now" [10]).[25] Henry, like other typical Pym clergymen and academics, divorces himself from reality-- he is not responsible for "pounds and pence and pudding for dinner." As Hite observes, "If you were serious about the profession you probably threw your clothes on the floor and figured God would take care of them." Pym exposes the pretensions of men like Hoccleve, their "pompous acceptance of their own importance, and the vain belief in the myth they've created" (Brothers 67).

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[25] Bergson's description of the comic as the physical being present or intrusive when the moral is at issue is important here. Bergson states that for one striving for heroism to remember that s/he has a body is comic. He breaks this down even further when the body takes precedence over the soul, when manner seeks to outdo matter, and when the letter aims to oust the spirit, comedy results (see his Chapter I).

The need for men to be reflected at "twice their natural size" is held up to the light of ridicule. Even the almost endlessly loyal Belinda is irritated by Hoccleve's attitude of superiority, and of course Harriet lampoons him whenever possible. Pym's subversion of religion continues in Jane and Prudence; here, too, the hierarchy and bureaucracy of the church are featured. Jane, as one greatly impressed by Victorian novels, once envisioned herself as the perfect helpmeet-- a "gallant, cheerful" (6), thrifty and healing force in the parish, mother of a large brood. But, to her dismay, she is too fanciful, outspoken and independent.

She is made aware of "other qualities which she did not possess and which seemed impossible to acquire" (7)-- humility, placidness, deep concern for her appearance. When she attempts to behave as peacemaker, as befits a character in a novel by Mrs. Henry Wood, she is told that "it is a matter altogether out of your sphere" (129). Jane is sometimes quite forlorn, although such is Pym's skill that she never seems pathetic: Jane believes her status as vicar's wife will give her magic power, but when she realizes that she can't make parishioners settle their argument over a beer, she sees the episode as "one of those rather tedious comic scenes in Shakespeare-- Dogberry and Verges, perhaps ...." (130). Instead of dwelling on her "failure," she begins to smile, imagining them all in Elizabethan costume.

In Jane and Prudence, the pettiness of the parishioners is mercilessly mocked; Mr. Whiting laments at length on the vicar's furniture, mealtimes, and his wife's inability to cook ("It isn't fair on the vicar" [150]). What Brothers calls "religious and scholarly niceties" (66) preoccupy these men; fussing over infinitesimal details in churchly life is roughly equivalent to Atwood's "comma-counting" detailed in the previous chapter. The members of a group become so preoccupied with minor details and petty insults that their original purpose is lost. Whether it is a Canon attempting to catch Jane stubbing out a cigarette, shame over her lack of proper curtains, or the embarrassing appearance of animal-shaped soap in the guest bathroom, details are of great importance, and they're often related to protocol (the type of smile suitable in church) and to titles, as in academia.

True story: at a school in England, there once was a Canon. He has the unfortunate surname of Ball. ("He insisted on his title; 'Good morning, Canon Ball,'" D. reports.)

Woolf comments on the stultifying bureaucratic duties of the "sons of educated men." That endless routine work for pay is somehow more noble, more pleasing to God than the work of a mother is reprehensible. She cites a quotation from Bishop Gore:

> This is an awful mind-and-soul-destroying life. I really do not know how to live it. The arrears of important work accumulate and crush. (3G 82)

As in male-dominated academia, where "important work" is often synonymous with bureaucracy, paperwork and ceremony, the soul and the mind get gobbled up with detail. "Important" work, surely, is a matter of definition. Ministers like Henry and Nicholas, mild though they are, must devote so much time to matters of bureaucracy and protocol that "[o]ur bishops and deans seem to have no soul with which to preach and no mind with which to write" (82). A sense of expansion and freedom is lost, buried underneath paper and self-aggrandizement.

Religious elitism-- the ranking of the elect and the damned-- is another aspect of this self-aggrandizement Woolf discusses and Pym, Atwood and Spark lampoon. Woolf labels it "religious pride" (93), Spark "playing Providence," but it is the conviction, much like fevered nationalism, that one's own religion is the sole means of salvation. Woolf's Three Guineas discusses patriotism and how the term has one meaning for men and another for women. She believes nationalism to be ridiculous, particularly for women, since they hold no legitimate power. Nationalism is an "unreal loyalty" (80), related to religious, college, school, family and gender pride (80).

> She never tires, she never even flags, she never runs out of material. She talks about Moslem women, Chinese women, women in the macho countries, Spanish, Italian, Mexican women: "All women are our burden," she says, and I know she didn't read that in a book because she doesn't read. "I don't feel separate when I hear about them I feel as if it's happening to me .... I bend under the load of faggots slowly climbing a hill in Greece; I slink down the streets furtively in purdah, feeling wrong that I'm seen at all; my feet are crippled from being bound; I have the clitoridectomy and become my husband's possession, feeling nothing in sex and giving birth in agony. I live in countries where the law gives my husband the right to beat me, to lock me up, disciplina." (French 306)

Pym's less admirable characters mock a "tendency to Rome and Russia," or Atwood's Mrs. Smeath dismisses Elaine as a heathen, or Jean Brodie "elects herself the God of Calvin," this self-serving pride allows one to don blinders. Again there are many parallels to an academic/scholarly conversion, a citizenship oath (I've always found ex-Americans the most zealous converts to Canadianism, loudest in proclaiming the U.S.'s faults), or any such philosophical switch.[26]

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[26] Many feminist critics-- Susan Griffin, Mary Daly, Judy Little, Carol Christ-- have dissected the notion of separate female/male spheres: the "kinder, kuche, kirche" assignment. Woolf makes the connection between religious and political tyranny explicit in Three

In The Handmaid's Tale, Atwood views a world where, as in the Montreal massacre, these views are taken to their logical conclusion; as I said before, women in Gilead are fragmented variations on the feminine half of dualism: some cook, some clean, some have sex, some are hostesses, some bear children, some keep other women in line-- all ironclad aspects of the feminine role. Offred's life or death is determined by her viable ovaries. As a one-time ordinary woman, she thinks about the differences imposed upon her body by fundamentalist religion:

> I used to think of my body as an instrument, of pleasure, or a means of transportation, or an implement for the accomplishment of my will. I could use it to ... make things happen.
>
> Now the flesh arranges itself differently. I'm in a cloud, congealed around a central object, the shape of a pear, which is hard and more real than I am .... (69)

Elsewhere she describes herself as a "womb with two legs." Like Connie in "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" Offred's body no longer belongs to her. Procreation is "serious business"; pleasure is redundant, arousal is frivolous-- Offred knows that ability to conceive is literally a matter of life and death.

Guineas, saying that priests and dictators alike emphasize the necessity of two worlds. She speculates upon the effect of one-half of humanity being rid of "all worldly cares and duties," or the care of the ORDINARY: " ... all those meaningless but highly ingenious turnings and twistings into which the intellect ties itself when rid of the cares of the household and the family" (fn. 31 to p. 146). Woolf sees this separation between the everyday, the ordinary so celebrated by my novelists, and the "higher" realms as the cause of "that separation between the Church and the people; between literature and the people; between the husband and the wife ..." (146). This split, this separation between the Church and the people-- the exalted and the everyday-- developed, as Mary Daly sees it, from the psychic female/male split in the story of the Fall. The separation has become so embedded in Western thought that it seems "natural." Spirit opposes nature; soul opposes body; it is Bakhtin's "lived in/looked at" paradigm all over again.

> Ceausescu family law: no Romanian woman could have access to birth control or abortion until she had delivered five children. "A physically ill woman could not avoid having children because of the Ceausescu laws," said Dr. Margareta Crotanu, the orphanage chief medical officer. (Edmonton Journal Jan. 3, 1990 1a)

Janine is paraded for the Wives as a muscular, strong girl ("No Agent Orange in her family" [109]). She resembles a beauty-pageant contestant; like Miss America, Handmaids have scrupulous background, health, and sanity checks. Though sometimes a defective one gets through: Vanessa Williams' past displayed nationwide, Kai Lani Rae Rafko confessing she puts Vaseline on her teeth to keep her lips from sticking to them and hinting darkly at liposuction and padded bras;[27] Janine's hidden history of a nervous breakdown, Moira's lesbianism. All not quite making the grade.

(I remember a beach towel, seen when I was ten or so. You know those butcher's diagrams of cows and pigs, with dotted lines showing the different cuts-- tenderloin, butt steak, T-bone and so on? I saw this-- the Planned Pig, the Planned Cow, as Atwood calls them-- done with a woman's body: she was sectioned-- except for her head-- into pieces. Smiling over her shoulder, a balloon came out of her mouth, "What's YOUR choice cut?")

(Or the cafeteria at college: the frat boys would sit together and, as women walked by, hold up score cards like Olympic judges, one through ten. Then they would loudly explain the basis for their mark: ass too big, tits too small, legs like rulers.)

One way to defeat a thinking that sees human beings in these terms is feminist comedy. The Handmaid's Tale seems, on the surface, so grim, but

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27. Both women were winners of the Miss America pageant.

there is so much laughter, so many jokes, lots of word-play. Offred's laughter never seems to be of the masochistic or escapist variety, but subversive. After the Commander asks her to kiss him "as if she meant it" (136) and to play Scrabble, she hears noise "coming up, coming out, of the broken place, my face .... The wandering womb, they used to think. Hysteria." (138) She tries hard to take him seriously, to solemnly weigh up the possible meanings of this request, but "no matter what I do there's something hilarious about it." (136) Despite her desperate situation, she sees its real absurdity, its lack of proportion:

> Red all over the cupboard, mirth rhymes with birth, oh to die of laughter. (138)

Offred's laughter is "like lava," "seismic," "volcanic," "like an epileptic fit." Nature, woman, laughter, birth, hysteria: all are red flags in the face of "civilization" and control; in fact, Offred describes the effect of forbidden words written in a lavatory ("Aunt Lydia sucks"): like a "flag waved on a hill."

(Stop. Make a grocery list. Out of coffee: a real tragedy.)

Mockery of Marriage

> "Filthy luck, I'm preggers. Come to the wedding." (GSM)

> So she married him; she did what he asked. Helen thought it was a pretty good story for a start. (Garp)

> He returned to America and presented this large pregnant athlete to his father. (WMM)

Liminal imagery used in feminist comedy incites a "radically irreverent laughter besmirching the respectable" (Little 8). If there is anything more respectable or traditional than the act of getting married-- even or especially if pregnant-- I certainly haven't heard of it yet. Little and sociologists on "marriage and the family" (the title of a course at my high school-- you could think of marriage as ranked equally with Machine Shop or Theory of Football, equally respectable and mainstream) see social structures as fortresses to defend against such chaos, such dangerous forces as making a spectacle, disgrace, promiscuity, being caught in a "limbo" between roles, indecency.[28]

Garp and Helen do not marry for the usual romantic reasons-- eyes meeting across a crowded room or fireworks exploding at a kiss. Instead, they grow into their marriage. When they meet in high school, Helen tells Garp that she would only marry "a wrestler who's also a writer ... a real writer" (89). Garp proceeds to woo her with long letters and eventually "The Pension Grillparzer." Their time together is marked by struggle: after their first night together, Garp sprawls in the wrestling room, "wondering who had gotten whom" (188, orig. emph.). Irving comments that "... I got interested in the politics of marriage or the politics of separation ...." (186); this idea, comically explored in The Water-Method Man, of marriage as a siege, a battle (a parallel to graduate school) to be endured, each side fighting to a standstill-- is in direct contrast to other novels of marriage and the family. Garp and Helen, "in their stubborn, deliberate ways" (182), don't fall in love until well into their marriage-- they married only because of a "hunch."

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[28] In Shakespearean comedy marriage indicates the willingness to accept roles proffered by society and the overcoming of obstacles (witchcraft, nature, objecting parents) put in the way. A new "social unit" (Frye, "The Argument of Comedy) is formed. Bergson's analysis of traditional comedy applies well here: that comedy is directed at outsiders and has an "averaging effect." This conservative comedy "repress[es] the separatist tendency. Its function is to ... readapt individuals to the whole ... to round off the corners."

In contrast, the marriages in the novels of Atwood, Irving, Pym and Spark are for nontraditional, "foolish," or disrespectful reasons; or, even more radically, these novels celebrate "un-marriage," or are anti-marriage in tone. Where traditional comedy sees marriage as a sign of unity with society and with maturity, marriage in feminist comedy is often satirized as a return to childhood; sometimes, also, instead of signifying wholeness ("the two shall become one"), it means loneliness and isolation.

Biggie and Bogus, like any number of couples in modern (and not-so-modern) comedies, do things in the "wrong" order; the first time they meet, Biggie observes, "sex .... Why does it have to be so serious? You have to start pretending I'm so special to you ..." (130). Like Helen and Jenny after her, Biggie turns the traditional relationship upside down. Critics have labeled Irving's women characters "feminists," but they are also feminist comedians, with a tough wit rarely seen in literature. Like many of Pym's characters, but in blunter, less ladylike fashion, they tell the truth: Bogus, by name and by deed, contrasts Biggie's "hurtful truths"; Tulpen's "factual" name fits her perfectly: she only speaks when she has a fact. These women are also perfectly willing to initiate action, instead of following the prescribed role of wife and mother as passive and completely concerned with "feminine" matters.

Helen (Ph.D in English at 23) agrees to have a child "only if Garp would agree to take care of it" (187). Garp loves never going out of the house-- his life centers on cooking, writing and childcare (would this be considered bad, agoraphobic, in a woman?-- and rather heroic in a man?), while his wife works as a professor and critic. Several men in Irving's fiction work in the traditionally female role of caretaker and nurturer: Couth, in The Water-Method Man, caretakes a rich family's estate and Bogus' little family; John, in Hotel New Hampshire, looks after his blind father and his siblings, and decides to raise his sister's child; after Jenny is killed, Garp functions as caretaker of her estate and emulates her "Good Nurse" qualities, in giving Ellen James a home and helping take care of "damaged women." Here the comic principal of inversion is at work: Irving says that the most heroic thing a man can do is to be a good father.

> ... his morality is not that of traditional social and religious dogma ... [but] a celebration of life. Hence, while it is clear that for Irving ... "life is out of control," yet the presence of life-affirming actions and relationships remains to justify his comic-tragic vision. (Harter and Thompson 10)

In this fiction men do not mature simply by fathering a child biologically, but by being a good parent, a good family member-- again, the ORDINARY is celebrated. If this sounds conservative or mundane, consider how rare a good father really is in fiction. Maybe my literary education is not everything it should be, but I can remember no fathers sacrificing themselves for their children (the reverse is true-- Abraham offering to sacrifice his children for himself and his God [Genesis 22:10]); I do remember the Duchess of Malfi and Edna Pontellier. Is sacrifice a bit extreme? Then are there fictional male characters who actually worry about being a father? That consider it important to them? (But writing this makes me think too much of my own father, in Michigan with a shadow on his lung, and then I can't be scholarly and analytical any more, but remember watching ballgames and demolition derbies together on Saturday afternoon.)

Pregnancy, in Irving's fiction, is a strange and comic event, a catalyst for various serious moral decisions (in Cider House Rules, it's "an orphan or an abortion") that are agonizing and, again, "between the acts," a hovering between various stages: marriage, life, death, maturity, adolescence:

> "I thought you had a fucking intrauterine device," I said. "An I.U.D., right?"
>
> "I.U.D.," she said. "IBM, NBC, CBS ..."
>
> "N.C.A.A.," I said.
>
> "U.S.A.," she said. "Well, sure, I had one, dammit. But it was just a device, like any other .... I don't even know how they work." (138-9)

Biggie and Bogus return home and get married, as convention demands, but separate soon afterward. The woman with whom Bogus then lives "pulls a Jenny Fields"; wanting a child, but finding Trumper unwilling to commit to any one or thing permanently, she decides to go it alone. Harter and Thompson observe that Biggie and Tulpen are both "strong sane women capable of opposing male absurdity" (48)-- Tulpen supports herself, Biggie faces Bogus' desertion with equanimity, and both are unselfish and tolerant without surrendering their self-respect.

Jenny Fields is one of the strongest and most admirable characters in contemporary fiction. She wants a child, but does not want to surrender what Franny would call the "her in her" to have one. In a scene now famous, Jenny "virtually impregnates herself" (Harter and Thompson 76) with the sperm of Technical Sergeant Garp. Again, the comic principal of inversion is at work. Jenny's action is reminiscent of men who brag that they may have unknowingly, uncaringly and irresponsibly fathered children somewhere. "Old Virgin Mary" Jenny's deliberate, responsible, and caring conception of a child underlines how things should be. She is proud of Garp, "especially pleased with the manner in which she had gotten him" (35), and very happy with being single: all things which irritate the insular community of Steering School, and all things which violate social (and fictional) convention-- "she could show a little humility." Plotting her own pregnancy, when revealed in A Sexual Suspect, is morally unacceptable.

> But what made Jenny Fields vulgar? Not her legal brothers, not the man in the movie theater who stained her uniform. Not her mother's douche bags, though these were responsible for Jenny's eventual eviction .... In her autobiography, Jenny wrote, "I wanted a job and I wanted to live alone. That made me a sexual suspect. Then I wanted a baby, but I didn't want to have to share my body or my life to have one. That made me a sexual suspect, too." (13, 15)

Though Jenny HAS fulfilled "every woman's biological destiny," she does so gleefully, unashamedly and, worst of all, without a man. This is vulgar: "The verbal norms of official and literary language, determined by the canon **[Canon Ball?]**, prohibit all that is linked with fecundation, pregnancy, childbirth. There is a sharp division between familiar speech and 'correct' language" (Bakhtin 320).

Jenny's "eccentric" action in the 1940s ironically foreshadows the planned pregnancy of Offred's mother (which in turn comments upon the topic of "who controls women's bodies?"):

> I had you when I was thirty-seven .... It was a risk, you could have been deformed or something. You were a wanted child, all right, and did I get shit from some quarters! My oldest buddy Tricia Foreman accused me of being pronatalist, the bitch .... I don't need a man around, what use are they except for ten seconds' worth of half babies. (HT 114)

(Jay Leno: "I just heard that Pizza Hut has invented a pizza that is ready in thirty seconds. Thirty seconds! Now the average guy can have dinner and sex in under a minute.")

Offred's mother tells the father of her child, "Just do the job, then you can bugger off," as Jenny does in a more literal sense to Sergeant Garp (114). Jenny, Franny, Tulpen and Offred's mother: none see childbirth as a necessary rite of passage, or as a punishment for the pleasure of sex, but as a choice. Their assertion of the right to choose-- or discard-- motherhood and wifehood violates traditional feminine slavery to the body.

Similarly, Spark's heroines often greet marriage with a decided lack of enthusiasm; as Dorothy Markham announces, "Filthy luck. I'm preggers. Come to the wedding" (GSM 44). The inimitable Miss Brodie, of course, refuses the possibility of matrimony, preferring to "give herself" instead. Pym's women are wonderful examples of those "free from unreal loyalties." In Some Tame Gazelle, both Belinda and Harriet receive offers of marriage from men in higher social circles: Belinda from a Bishop, Theo Grote, who, before popping the question, muses aloud, "She is not fair to outward view ..." (223) and then quotes Paradise Lost. When she refuses him, and when Harriet refuses Mr. Mold, both sisters are relieved; their contentment at being single, sociable and independent will never have to be compromised. Benet says Some Tame Gazelle is an "unmarriage plot": Pym

> turns the staples of the romantic novel upside down: her heroine and hero are in late middle age; love in their world is rarely anguished or even unsettling; marriage is not a glorious conclusion to a heroine's story, though she's given the option ....

Benet's observation is much like French's in The Women's Room-- that plays, or female Bildungsromane, always end with the heroine's marriage. To upset this convention, a traditional sign of a character's integration into society, is to upset society itself. Similarly, Atwood calls The Edible Woman a comedy where "the wrong people get married at the end."

> Q: How many sociologists does it take to change a light bulb?
> A: None. It's the system that needs changing.

The traditional nuclear family is celebrated in mainstream religion. Society has organized itself around the idea of children having a male and a female parent, with certain roles assigned to each. (A student, incredulous, during a discussion on traditional values: "Your husband

DUSTS?" Or a feminist writer's observation about domestic duties: "My husband and I have an agreement about housework. Neither one of us does it.")

We are socialized-- some would say brainwashed-- to accept this structure as the only good and "right" one. Ironically, though the fundamentalist Christian family cannot claim to model itself on the family of Christ, who had a surrogate father and "blended family," in 1990s terms. Even God is a Holy Trinity of males-- Father, Son, Holy Ghost-- with no mother, subordinate or otherwise, anywhere in sight. Women attempt to recover a goddess or find a mother-figure in religion, but the ultimate religious family, if put in a modern context, would go against the norm. As Woolf observes in Three Guineas, the "private" world of the family is only a smaller version of what is publicly sanctioned. The norm of being raised in a male-dominated, or leader-dominated, family, is founded on the Church's hierarchical structure (that is, St. Paul equates the husband as the head of the household with Christ as head of the church). The few exceptions are oddities, eccentricities, or evil. Society uses parents as teachers in primary socialization-- that is, most of what happens to us before we know it's happening. The mother of quadruplets-- three boys and a girl-- says that

> Spenser is the "wild one." Glenn is a fighter, but quite talkative. John bites. Kathleen is fussy.
>
> "She's such a girl. She'll never get dirty and the other day she cried like crazy because there was a hole in her sock."
>
> .... "I expect they'll be very close. They are already protective of Kathleen." ("Supermom," Edmonton Journal, August 27, 1989)

Or one of my favorite targets, the Superstore, advertising on two separate pages BOYS' TOYS (GI Joes, Leggo, Etch-a-Sketch, machine guns, construction kits) and GIRLS' TOYS (Barbies, makeup mirrors, shopping carts, miniature irons).

> Man for the field and woman for the hearth
> Man for the sword and for the needle she,
> Man with the head, and woman with the heart,
> Man to command, and woman to obey,
> All else confusion.
> (Tennyson, The Princess)

As the Commander says of the equal rights movement in the twentieth century, "Those years were just an anomaly .... a fluke. All we've done is return things to Nature's norm" (206).

Eventually we become used to masculinity equaling power; if God said so, then it must be true. The male as "the head of the house" is something that has only recently come into question (and, in fundamentalist religion, is not in question at all); the divided consciousness, as Daly observes, the idea of feminine evil and the male viewpoint, came to be self-evident truths instead of judgments that can be suspect (469). This social pact dominates family structure-- it is institutionalized, so that male judgment comes to equal God's judgment.

In my comic novels, there are two clear camps: if the novel centers on a traditional nuclear family, with parents and children, it will somehow subvert conservative ideas of "family" through inversion or role reversal. Or the comic novels may not contain a "family" at all, in the strictly defined sense, but a loose and eccentric community. Jenny, Garp and Helen invert the usual domestic and maternal modes, which I've discussed. The Hotel New Hampshire seems to focus on a normal, "good old American" family: Harvard-educated father, pretty mother, crusty grandfather and five children. But the Garp pattern is repeated: Win Barry is imaginative, dreamy, and impractical, not the firm "head of the house" in any case. His wife and children guard him against life's harsher realities, allowing him to live happily in his illusions. As Franny says, "Father doesn't know what's going on."

The lovely family is made up of misfits, eccentrics, Woolf's outsiders: Egg is obsessed with costumes, Lily is a dwarf, Frank is a homosexual, and, the greatest taboo of all, John and Franny are in love with each other: in a single novel, social taboos ("intimately accepted patterns of belief and behavior, patterns usually linked to the roles assigned to each sex" [Little 9]) are smashed. Irving explains in a Gabriel Miller interview that he wanted to give Franny (the novel's "hero") the two most difficult obstacles to overcome the brutal gang rape, and the knowledge that her brother is in love with her. (Critics of comedy sometimes say that the world is so tolerant, that norms have been so far abandoned or eroded that there is nothing left to mock. Irving disproves this, by tackling such fundamentally taboo issues as incest, rape, and pornography.)[29]

John and Susie also make up a "weird kind" of family. They use the final Hotel New Hampshire as a refuge for themselves, Father, and for women who have been raped. Like Jenny's house at Dog's Head Harbor, the hotel is a sanctuary for those hurt by the world. Franny and Junior's baby goes there because John is a caretaker: a "perfect father," as Franny says, "Or a mother, man," as Junior adds. This is not the enforced surrogacy of The Handmaid's Tale, but has a rather lighthearted logic to it. John, Garp, and Couth (The Water-Method Man) are all associated with caretaking, minding families and keeping track of memories.

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[29] In the [London, England] Sunday Telegraph, subtitled "Signs of the End," Peter Simple writes

> In our kind of society, modesty, shame, decency, all those ancient, long-cherished virtues have already been turned into subjects for joking. What is now under attack is the last defense of humanity: basic common sense. Shame, modesty, decency may go; but when common sense has gone as well, what hope shall we have left? (July 8, 1990, p. 20)

(The article concerned a lesbian who is attempting to become pregnant through artificial insemination.)

This particular example supports Little's assertion that such a thing as a "normless" society does not exist, and that revolutionary comedy mocks exactly these "ancient, long-cherished virtues."

The rape crisis center and the Dog's Head Harbor retreat both hold out a family in the best sense of the word: they help people who are "having a bad time." The "family," or community in Pym's novels, defies conventional definition. Single women live happily together without one single "unit leader" or "man of the house." In Spark's The Girls of Slender Means and The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, men are shadowy figures (often stereotyped comic figures), while women at the May of Teck Club and Marcia Blaine School live, happily or unhappily, with little male authority.[30]

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30. Classic comedy generally relies on large ensemble casts. No one leader is usually evident or sought after. Feminist comedy is communal in tone and politics; because it is anti-hierarchical, it has been dismissed, mislabelled or ignored by critics. Until very recently, for example, Woolf's novels were not viewed as comedies in any political sense. Woolf's comedy, however, is highly political, as is her style: derisive, liminal ("Between the Acts") and centering on groups-- but a "leaderless and fragmented community" (Cuddy-Keane 274), not a structured or hierarchical group.

Further, Cuddy-Keane believes that in Between the Acts' loosely knit community, Woolf presents "a direct challenge to the powerful, leader-centered group" postulated by Freud in Civilization and Its Discontents, which were a "manifestation of aggressive instincts directed toward the outsider" (274, my emph.). Unlike revolutionary feminist comedy, which attempts to decenter authority, Freud's leader-centered group (mocked by Spark in Brodie) elevates a father-figure as leader.

In these novels, sex as a goal or determiner of fate in women's lives is comically resisted. Sex before marriage is seen as neither worse nor better than sex with the virtue of wedlock. Spark mocks the romanticized, "official" version of sex through Joanna Childe, a "nice girl," a rector's daughter. She believes she is entitled to fall in love only once, and develops a passion for a young curate. When he leaves, she begins to feel a great longing for his successor. "Once you admit you can change the object of a strongly-felt affection, you undermine the whole structure of love and marriage ...(23)," Spark wryly comments. The teaching, spoken and unspoken, that love is unfathomable, romantic, mystical, religious, is undermined; Joanna decides to "pluck out her right eye" (24), the second love she believes stands between her and the Kingdom of Heaven. Eventually she falls in love with poetry; as Nicholas astutely observes, it takes the place of sex for her. And, like the whores in the second Hotel New Hampshire, Selina is a true "girl of slender means" morally. By this I don't mean that by selling sex they are immoral; this is probably the most honest thing they do. But, as Howells observes of The Handmaid's Tale, in "a world of male/female functionality everyone is exchangeable and nobody has value" (64). It is in their acts of "savagery" (as Nicholas called it)-- the whores, in deserting the Berry family, and Selina, as she rescues not a friend, but a dress, from the wreckage of the bomb. (In a way, of course, this is far more pragmatic an action; Selina knows what is necessary for survival in such a world of functionality.)

Christianity often views prostitution as a necessary evil-- or as Daly observes, "bad" women are necessary to make "good" women possible; they are scapegoats, the "greatest guardians of virtue" (60). This hypocrisy-- has it to do with being outside the "elect"?-- is especially evident in Gilead. When the Commander takes Offred to Jezebel's he explains it: "Nature demands variety, for men. It stands to reason, it's part of the procreational strategy. It's Nature's plan" (222). He has there his own private carnival, but it is the conservative case of temporary sexual license for men only. And this license must work within strict limits: it must be kept secret, be accessible only to the elite, and must be justified as part of God's/Nature's plan.

At Jezebel's the "thinking by sexual analogy" is so strong that educated and once powerful women (a sociologist, a lawyer, an executive) are made to be prostitutes, posing in cheerleading outfits, leotards, and lingerie. Again, as with pregnancy, as with sex, the element of choice ("freedom to") is taken away.

> (T-shirt caption under a picture of Margaret Thatcher: "WE ARE ALL PROSTITUTES.")

Jenny Fields is surprised to hear that prostitution is illegal in many places: "Why can't a woman use her body the way she wants to? If someone wants to pay for it, it's just one more crummy deal" (136). A straightforward enough rationalization, but this seemingly simple transaction-- sex for money - opens a number of questions, none easy to solve. Does the man with the money-- because he has money-- think that by using a prostitute, he is in control? Is it a case of the employer having contempt for the employee?

> Perhaps he's reached that state of intoxication which power is said to inspire, the state in which you believe you are indispensable and can therefore do anything, absolutely anything you feel like, anything at all. (HT 221-2)

Prostitution seems to be "about" power-- who can do what to whom and get away with it, certainly.

"We are all terminal cases": death as comic?

> "Between men and women," as Jenny Fields said, "only death is shared equally." (*Garp* 607)

Death is the greatest taboo of all: something we are not able to control or resolve. Little, in writing on feminist comedy, sees death as the most liminal of all events. Like insanity and physical disintegration, death negatively confronts all of our instincts to organize, civilize, order. Little notes the "vast comic potential, the potential for inversion and for liminal attacks on norms" (118), in dying and death, recognizing its alliance with comedy as "the great equalizer."

In feminist comedy, the disintegration of the body and death, the thing dreaded and feared most, is treated "disrespectfully." Often death is discussed through the Rabelaisian technique of lowering the abstract to the earthy. Death for a "good" reason (the service of a cause in war or peace, in self-defense, through accident or disease) is made to seem irrelevant and foolish. The "noble" or mythic qualities of death are mocked.

Disintegration, the Rabelaisian quality of chaos represented in the human body, is strongly evident in these comic texts. As I said in my introduction, these authors lack squeamishness: the topics of death and dying are as fair game for comedy as adolescence, marriage, and birth. So is disintegration, the knowledge that we all fall apart. The shame and horror expressed at aging bodies-- especially women's-- arises from their "value" being contained solely through physical appearance. Western culture, with its devotion to youth, and its preoccupation with denying disintegration and death, "devalues" old people, especially old women. Carol Christ delineates this paradox:

> Some men are viewed as wise and authoritative in age, but old women are pitied and shunned. Religious iconography supports this cultural attitude towards aging women .... Moreover, religious mythology associates aging women with evil in the symbol of the wicked old witch. (Aphrodite 125)

Feminist writers have rejuvenated the history of witches, and their deaths for a peculiarly feminine evil. Daly points out that the word "wit" is allied with "witch"-- derived from "to know." This link-- between knowledge, comedy, women, and so-called "evil"-- is an important one to make here. The learning of a lifetime, in a woman, makes her an "old witch," while a man is lovably crotchety. Offred's mother is a perfect example of this. A feminist activist, she is perceived by the Gileadean government as an "Unwoman"; in a modern-day equivalent to witchburning, she is sent to the Colonies (where she wears a witchlike long, dark dress) to work cleaning up toxic waste until "her nose falls off."

The language used to describe Offred's earthy, witty, pugnacious mother and the old women of Memento Mori resembles Bakhtin's analysis of the grotesque body: "nothing completed, nothing calm and stable in the bodies of these old hags. They combine senile, decaying and deformed flesh with the flesh of new life, conceived but as yet unformed" (26).

Disintegration-- the necessity of age, decay, and death-- is studiously avoided in contemporary comedy. (I write this the day before turning 29, the Jack Benny age, the Edna Pontellier age, the last year before they write "aged primigravida" on your chart when you go in to have a baby. The last year I can mistrust everyone older than me.) As Little says, disintegration and death make up the last great taboo. How could it have been possible to have a "regenerating and laughing death"?

(Bakhtin 23); how could death itself be seen as "unfinished"? Bakhtin describes how the meaning of liminal/threshold events-- birth, sex, growing, death-- came to be changed and devalued by the Renaissance elevation of the whole, clean man. Once on equal terms with the business of the "upper" (learning, moral conduct, religion), the body became a lesser being.

(It occurs to me that a "regenerating death," a death that gives birth, is literally possible now; sign that donor card.)

> The Rabelaisian death inspired no terror, was no tragedy; it's a necessary link to its other side, birth. (Bakhtin 407)

Oh death, where is thy sting?

Spark's comic novel on death, Memento Mori, like many feminist novels, refuses closure. Death is inimical to the ordering impulses of society: somehow it does not fit and cannot be planned for (newscasters to the contrary, can a death ever be "timely"?). Like disintegration, insanity, birth, accident-- death is unexpected and unresolvable, with "vast comic potential, potential for inversions and for liminal attacks on norms" (Little). And like comedy, it is able to turn things upside down. Death and disintegration are another face of the Rabelaisian carnivalesque images: they are deeply comic, ridiculous even. Death itself phones people up and mocks them; it is the great equalizer. Disintegration, in the nursing home wards and elsewhere, removes all distinctions of money, class, even sex: the sociologist observes of a ninety-year-old patient: "If she had not been in a female ward ... one might not have been sure whether she was a very old man or a woman" (147).

Ruth Whittaker comments that in Memento Mori, the most stable characters are those whose philosophy of life includes death, while characters who hold themselves in high esteem seem most offended at the thought of dying. Again, the body intrudes to force characters into a realization of humans' fundamental equality; the body's disintegration is at the same time a regeneration: to be constantly reminded that "you must die" is to remind you that you must live. Death is a mocking intruder, but it also must be a companion. As Jean Taylor says, "It's difficult for people of advanced years to start remembering they must die. It is best to form the habit while young" (33). Each voice of death is different, depending on its listener: to Dame Lettie it is "quite matter-of-fact, not really threatening" (8), though eventually he becomes "cultured ... [b]ut sinister" (86). Her brother Godfrey (who thinks of himself not as "I" but "one") describes the caller as "quite a common little fellow .... a barrow boy" (86), until he receives the call himself: "If it occurs again I shall write to The Times." Guy, however, tells "the young fellow" to go to hell (160).

The novelist Charmian, when given the message, replies that she has been remembering her own death for thirty years or more (110), and then slowly and painfully makes herself tea. It is nearly a Mrs. Dalloway party: tea, biscuits, a pretty cloth on the tray, a celebration in the midst of recognizing death. Alec Warner, the sociologist, also receives the call. As a good academic, he writes the incident down, cross-references it, and notes: "'Query: mass hysteria'" (120). Retired P.C. Mortimer believes the offender is Death himself, yet his caller is always a soft-spoken, respectful woman.

> If I had my life over again I should form the habit of nightly composing myself to thoughts of death. There is no other practise which so intensifies life .... Without an ever-present sense of death life is insipid. (130)

Death is able to erase the greatest taboo: the line between ordinary people and God. Matt O'Brien, an elderly patient in a mental home, believes he _is_ God: "I recollect all creatures" (185); further, he resides within frail and "sexless flesh" (186), greatly resembling the androgynous near-centenarian, Mrs. Bean. All receive the message, the reminder of death and its ability to break down social barriers, but all deal differently with it.

Spark treats aging, disintegration and death as part of the carnival; to age is a part of life, no different in importance from giving birth or having sex. The old people's physical degeneration is as much a target for liminal comedy as is sex, the other great equalizer (it's interesting to note that in _Memento Mori_, we're given a group of octogenarians who are just as interested in sex as younger people, and just as vain, petty, and absurd; it's a point of pride to Godfrey that he had "never been [Lisa Brooke's] lover in any part of England"). One of the novel's funniest scenes involves a mock-heroic duel-- of two old men with walking sticks. The "Grannys" on the ward, as Jean Taylor observes, are far from being sweet old ladies: Sister Bursted becomes Sister Bastard, Sister Lucy is Sister Lousy, one granny is an ex-convict. When told that one part of the ward is "geriatric corner," Granny Roberts demands a definition:

> "It's to do with old age. There must be some very old patients coming in."
> "We supposed to be teen-agers, then?" (100)

Reversal is another important part of aging; since distinctions are erased, what was once inferior is now "on top." Jean Taylor once had an affair with Alec and realized their social inequality (she is Charmian's maid; he is a professor). Like Sandy, she observes: "There is a time for loyalty and a time when loyalty comes to an end" [149]). Near the end of her life she is able to free Charmian's husband from blackmail. The group, in their seventies and eighties, with wildly different social backgrounds, are equally visited by death; no respecter of titles or rank, death takes Dame Lettie Colson and the newspaper vendor Granny Barnacle, bestselling novelist Charmian Colson and her maid Jean Taylor.

In Memento Mori, Spark does something that is rarely seen: she presents a group of old people who are not "cute" or pathetic or romanticized or much different at all to other members of society, except for their advanced ages. Like Pym's older characters, some face death with equanimity:

> Being over seventy is like being engaged in a war. All our friends are going or gone and we survive amongst the dead and the dying as on a battlefield .... or suffering from war nerves.

Somehow the official and the serious have been elevated over the comic. Bakhtin observes that early on, the serious and the comic were equally sacred, equally important. A funeral would glorify the deceased, as now, but it would also deride him or her (6), as at an Irish wake, the deceased's favorite jokes are told (as a relative in her 80s said to me, "When I'm dead slam down the lid and put a pot of coffee on it. Have a party, have the whole family there. Tell all the old stories. I'll be laughing too").

> A United Church of Christ minister and professor of religion says, "A funeral should be a place you laugh, you know. Those who understand the faith know that death is not the end ....
>
> "In counseling of the family (after a death), I always ask the family what were the favorite jokes of the person who died ... When you tell a joke, it doesn't tell people what to think. It opens up space to think." (Edmonton Journal Dec. 11, 1989)

Other religions

In [a circular letter of the Paris School of Theology in 1444]

> foolishness and folly, that is, laughter, are directly described as 'man's [sic] second nature' and are opposed to the monolith of the Christian cult and ideology (Bakhtin 83).

Bakhtin describes how, in medieval times, priests would tell jokes from the pulpit at Easter. After the sadness of Lent, the congregation would laugh as a way of signifying rebirth. Our "second nature" was then given free play. By this, I think Bakhtin means that our wild or uncivilized side revels in laughter. Because laughter is almost impossible to control, it is dangerous to existing structures. He notes how often frivolous cathecisms, "indecent interpretations" of the Bible and parodies of all aspects of the church, were employed in Rabelais' time. The laughter incited by blasphemies is directed at the upper stratum. Laughter then builds its own world in opposition to the official world (84-88), which can explain why such celebrations were eventually taken out of the hands of the people and assigned to restricted days.

Garp's religion is laughter, as he tells the lady from Findlay, Ohio. Frank Barry, even more of an outsider than Garp, goes "into a religion more vastly lacking in seriousness than even the established religions; he joined a kind of anti-everything sect" (250). He founds, as Lily says, a religion of anarchy, nihilism, trivial silliness in terrible times, depression in joy, and constant surprises. The world ("the goddamn Welt") is senseless and hopeless to Frank, so he founds a religion of surprises and belief in "zap," rather like Garp's awareness of absurdity ("lunacy and sorrow"). Garp had been a "humorless child-- and never religious-- so perhaps he now took comedy more seriously than others" (232). He admits that "[in] the manner of most religions ... my laughter is pretty desperate" (233). He tries very hard to point out to

Mrs. Poole that his laughter arises out of a sense of absurdity and is based in compassion, using the long (and rather pompous) story about the Indian wedding as illustration. This results in a comedy-within-a-comedy: Mrs. Poole, who has complained that nobody brings their children up right, addresses Garp as "Dear Shithead," and shoots back a nasty reply. This makes Garp lose both his patience and his sense of humor.

(There is never enough laughter in religion, and often not enough religion in laughter. I remember sitting with my sisters in Sunday School, being glared at for giggling or not being somber enough for the occasion. Why, as in school, are the teachers and the leaders so serious?)

Spark's references to religion and the supernatural are difficult; often ambiguous, unlike Irving's bawdiness or Pym's parody, that her meanings are often difficult to pin down. "Readers who seek High Seriousness, who demand simple coherences, who dislike the mingling of terror and absurdity and distrust parodic play-- such readers have been puzzled, put off ..." (Hart 26). Spark herself, in a statement that's been much quoted in an effort to understand religion in her work, says that she sees Catholicism as a "norm to depart from" (Glavin 222). In 1961, she said (rather enigmatically) that her conversion to Catholicism gave her "something to work on as a satirist" (qtd. in Randisi 132), and that she views ridicule as an honorable weapon. Further, she insists that there is no line separating the supernatural from the natural (223). Material objects, the ordinary, as I've mentioned, take on a luminescence in her work, and directly oppose the emphasis on the opposition and supposed innate difference of the material and the spiritual in mainstream religion. The acknowledgment of material concerns (Woolf's foregrounding of dinners, clothing and private rooms, Rabelais' insistence on including details of the body and its needs and delights, Pym's joy in food and other small luxuries) is essential to an understanding of feminist comedy and religion. Not only because it is based in the Rabelaisian "argument between Carnival and Lent," as Irving would say, but because it denies the mind/body, ideal/real split embedded in Christianity and hence in our culture. It also emphasizes the multi-layered (something I'm attempting to do here), the various, and the flexible.

"Its laughing aspect"

Women have been both blatantly and subtly encouraged to put faith solely in the spiritual, to bank on happiness in another life.[31] Daly categorizes this as one of the three "false deities" related to religion and feminism:

> -- God as a stopgap measure for our incomplete knowledge ("God's Will")
> -- God as a reward or punishment (making us focus attention on the next life, not this one)
> -- God as judge of sin (confirming the rightness of the status quo). (29)

Laughter is a way of breaking down these strongly sanctioned structures; like comedy directed at the academy and other oppressive institutions, laughter can be powerful enough to allow "an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts" (Hazin in Bakhtin 93). Comedy, as my four novelists show, can be a force that destroys old structures, but also has the power to begin the process of positive change.

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[31] Women's assignment to roles as spiritual caretakers (like Hawthorne's Goodman Brown, who believes of his wife Faith that "I'll cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven") has been effective in limiting political power.

> ... no justifiable separation between "being spiritual" and "being political." No choice between personal well-being and global change. One signifies the other .... Anything less is a lie. (Mor 35)

> ... people usually do not think of laughter as a spiritual experience .... I now understand that laughter can be the mediator of transformation. (Christ, Aphrodite, 6)

Little describes much comedy as "liminal"-- taking place "betwixt and between," or, indeed, as a go-between mediating in a world where old norms have "slipped," a carnival world where nothing is established or expected. The radical laughter of feminist comedy can begin a process of transformation. As Cixous says in "The Laugh of the Medusa," laughter can shatter the framework of institutions; Leclerc sees laughter as a way of breaking the chains of female/male socialization. To paraphrase Woolf's statement at the beginning of this chapter, by laughing at the church and the institutions it inspires and supports, women can "free the religious spirit from its present servitude." Religion as an unimpeachable source of authority-- one that supports the status quo as "God's will" or "Nature's way"-- can be transformed through laughter and irreverence.

> The influence of the comic spirit was irresistible: it made a man [sic] renounce his official state as monk, cleric, scholar, and perceive the world in its laughing aspect. (Bakhtin 13)

CHAPTER THREE

THE SELF

> Why do I feel that there are severances and oppositions in the mind, as there are strains from obvious causes on the body? What does one mean by 'the unity of the mind'? I pondered, for clearly the mind has so great a power of concentrating at any point at any moment that it seems to have no single state of being. (Woolf, ROO 92-3)

"Realistic" characters in comedy are presented as having a unified, sole, "core" identity. In mainstream comedy, realistic characters entertain and/or enlighten us by achieving happiness: romantic love, conquering fear, attaining the Holy Grail. Advertisements also put forth the idea that there is a perfect self out there somewhere. The REAL YOU is presented as an unshakable possibility: through joining Weight Watchers ("it changed my life," complete with before-and-after photos) or the Army ("be all that you can be"), one can expect to live happily ever after. The idea of completion is important here. Even Estee Lauder's lotion promises to "make the world you live in a little more perfect" (Wolf 67).

Language, as a determiner of the self, is certainly linked to the question of the autonomous individual. One of the central ideas I'd like to fasten on here: if the meanings of words can be contextually (or culturally) different, can one's identity also be contextually different? Feminist practice has rehabilitated labels like "spinster," "virago," and "witch," by questioning the "added" value (or devaluation) and judgments of worth. Or, as Atwood says of her mother, "Though she is sweet and old and a lady, she is not a sweet old lady" (Bluebeard's Egg 6). Central to my (and my authors') questioning of the concept of the autonomous individual is also the question of the language used to express-- or attack-- the "single state of man." And throughout the exploration I'll be using my own writing style as a method of interrogation (or at least of "wondering") in itself.

Dovetailed into the idea of language is that of identity: how mutability and flexibility are explored in feminist comic texts. This idea in itself has undergone several radical revisions (yes, re-visions too, but more puns later). My thesis proposal (oh, innocence) mentions the theme of "creating an identity"-- fine. But I've also written about one's "private inner core"; my candidacy exams use the phrase "an integration of beings" as the desired aim of temporarily assuming alternate identities, costumes, bodies-- although I did see the "quick-change artists" of Atwood *et al.* as mockers of narrow-mindedness and overspecialization. Then, thanks to some prodding from various people, this "inner core" began to seem a little too facile, a bit too conservative (hadn't I started out with laughing Medusas, breaking chains of socialization, and so on?). And tied to this was my wish for a new style in this (anti-) thesis. I'd like to use overlays, colored ink, centerfolds (talk about using the oppressor's tools against him!),[1] LAYERS. Yesterday while thinking about this I wrote:

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[1] Centerfolds and the magazine that spawned them have become an increasing concern on college campuses. The University of Alberta's bookstore was embroiled in controversy over sales of *Playboy*. Ohio State recently had the magazine's chief photographer on campus, "interviewing" students for the Girls of the Big Ten Conference ($500 for nude poses, $250 for partially nude, $100 for fully clothed). Although University of Michigan protested the magazine photographer's presence on campus, a faculty member of OSU's Center for Women's Studies said *Playboy*'s presence at OSU wasn't that important an issue (*Columbus Dispatch*, May 29, 1991). And, in the small English Department in which I'm teaching now, a colleague posted a notice for *Playboy*'s College Fiction Contest on the departmental notice board. It was only after a department meeting and a lengthy argument over free speech versus sexual intimidation that the poster came down.

> I like the idea of silent movie captions: first there's a flurry of action or dialogue, very stylized, with much rolling of eyes and waving of hands, then a black and white, heavy, precise distillation of the action, or an ornate or strikingly emphasized transition ("YOU MUST PAY THE RENT!"). I wish there existed a way to do something like this in a thesis (like the photos I was putting in albums yesterday-- in the course of one year, 1984, appeared in England, Scotland, Michigan, Nova Scotia, raced down the wedding aisle (twice), cut cakes, packed cars, snapped pics, wrote exams, wore caps and gowns, drank coffee, gained weight, lost it, painted the car, nephews got bigger, grandparents smaller, drank champagne, opened presents, happy new year.)

All of this flipping through one album-- a Tralfamadorean telegram: "the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time" (Vonnegut 62-3), or the collage I mentioned way back in my introduction.[2]

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[2] This could be an "underwriting" or the presentation of a layered text. Lacombe, in a very useful analysis, attempts to peel back the many layers in The Handmaid's Tale, labeling the effect "palimpsest." Others-- Michael Cotsell on Pym, for one-- use musical terms to describe the multilayered effect: antiphony between the sisters in Some Tame Gazelle, for example.

This method of "underwriting," or using a multilayered text, is relevant to feminist questions of identity because it is so necessary to counter the patriarchal idea of a single (male) authority, particularly in institutions like academia and religion. I want to argue here that the "singular self" is an institution as deeply rooted as the aforementioned two. To consider "the self" as a sole entity is conservative, both in the popular and political senses (hence explanations of welfare recipients as subject to "human nature"). But to consider the self as shifting and multiple is revolutionary and feminist. Because it defies (and denies) authority, the multiple or successive self/selves are a destabilizing force in society. Melba Cuddy-Keane analyzes different types of comedy in Woolf's Between the Acts, noting that "... the readers and audiences's expectation of definitive meaning is overturned by the novelist and playwright's rejection of closure and the substitution of a continuous engagement in process" (279).

Process is an important term throughout this chapter; the idea, not of becoming (since this implies a conservative and temporary trying-on of identities, of achieving a final goal), but of the self "in process," like a procession or parade. Cuddy-Keane borrows Lucio Ruotoldo's phrase "an aesthetics of flux" to describe the politics of Between the Acts. The defiance of traditional closure was discussed briefly in Chapter Two and will be dealt with at more length later in this chapter.

An "underwriting" style is revolutionary, comic, and feminist. It attempts to overturn and examine what it is that we value and, by valuing, perpetuate. What these comic feminists (feminist comics?) do is to tackle the ideology that is so deeply embedded in them/ourselves, in society, and which is reflected in the way we write.[3] Blau DuPlessis examines the romance plot as an expression of "social practices surrounding gender" (WBE 4), saying that contemporary writers' concern

> enters their art works, not only in overt content and critical remarks but more drastically in the place where ideology is coiled: in narrative structure .... In short, the romance plot, broadly speaking, is a trope for the sex-gender system as a whole. Writing beyond the ending means the transgressive invention of narrative strategies, strategies that express critical dissent from dominant narrative. (5)[4]

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[3] Partly for lack of a better term, I've called my method "underwriting." But I also like the implications of the word: underground, underpinnings, underwear. Underwear because it is "unmentionable" and yet necessary; it's the "outer layer" closest to the body and probably the most honest layer of clothing we put on. To "underwrite" in a business sense is to "set one's name to an insurance policy" in order to become answerable for designated loss or damage. I suppose that the bottom layer of this thesis could be seen as answering for the "damage" done to various institutions and styles done in the top layer.

The idea of "underneath" is important in Bakhtin's writing's on the carnivalesque: the "lower bodily stratum" goes hand in hand (to mix a metaphor) with the principle of positive degradation. Similarly, feminist writers have appropriated the "woman on top" image used in Natalie Zemon Davis' work. The "lowering of the abstract to the earthy" is essential here.

[4] For further information on narrative structure as embodying ideology, see Nora Stovel, "'A Feminine Ending?': Symbolism as Closure in the Novels of Margaret Drabble," English Studies in Canada 15.1 (March 1989): 80-93. In A Natural Curiosity, Drabble presents us with a list of possible endings for Shirley Harper:

> None of these endings seem very plausible, very likely. But then, Shirley's behaviour for the past month has been highly unlikely. It astonished me, it astonished her, and maybe it astonished you. What do you think will happen to her? Do you think our end is known in our beginning, that we are

Spark et al., to varying degrees, invent strategies for communicating their dissatisfaction with a narrative that demands adherence to such ideology. Sometimes they mock dominant narrative through an exaggerated account of it-- as in a parody like Lady Oracle. Sometimes they quote "against the grain," as in metaphor-into-narrative, a strategy extensively employed in these works. Most often they question the "scripts that write us," as Spivak terms it.

> Writing beyond the ending, "not repeating your words and following your methods but ... finding new words and creating new methods," produces a narrative that denies or reconstructs seductive patterns of feeling that are culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised. (Blau DuPlessis, Writing Beyond the Ending 5; quotation from 3G)

One of these "culturally mandated, internally policed, hegemonically poised" patterns is the insistence upon unity and cohesiveness: the text and the self as a "single, solitary" entity.[5] After thinking, reading (mind in a twist from spiralling, oscillating too much-- where's my centrifuge?), I don't think that the self is a single, inalienable "core," nor do any of these texts lend themselves to a single unified reading. Our demands for the self's (and the texts') ideal stability comes from

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predetermined, that we endlessly repeat? .... Shall she resume her non-existence? Is that what you seriously expect? (A Natural Curiosity 251-2, 253).

[5] Belsey, as Bakhtin does, contends that at one point in history a character was seen as disunited and/or discontinuous. Liberal humanism, Belsey contends, has relied exclusively upon the unified subject, one with an "inalienable identity" and "continuous and inviolable interiority" (quoted in Levin 76), (a great deal like my previous description of a character's personal "inner core"). Tied to this is the false naming of the self as the single author of history; Moi uses explicitly patriarchal language to describe the humanist creator as "potent, phallic, and male-- God in relation to his world."

-- language (as I wrote that word, in a perhaps heavily ironic way, my pen ran out of ink). But I'm trapped inside this language, confusedly reading Marcus, who attacks Moi; Levin, who attacks Belsey, who attacks him back; Gallop, who tries to negotiate a truce between psychoanalysis and feminism. And the voice of authority steps in: what business do I have writing about the self? These people are theorists, linguists, psychoanalysts!

> ... how personal, so they will say, rubbing their hands with glee; women always are; I even hear them as I write. (Woolf, 1933 letter quoted in Rich 37; emphasis in original)

But I'll give it a shot (or, in keeping with the multiple nature of things, scatter it with buckshot). [Now my pen is leaking-- all over me, the desk, my lips-- I chew on it-- but it occurs to me that these words-- MY PEN IS LEAKING- will not have at all the same effect when transferred to word processor, possibly-probably edited out, and printed up cleanly, neatly, 12 cpi on a new white page. It will be a double or triple translation-- a cousin, thrice removed, Gorbachev on TV today speaking with CBC alternating translation between English and French, a baseball game on videotape-- at a double remove from the real moment. You, reader, can't see my marginalia (lovely word, that), the cross-outs and crumpled-ups: what you will get is a reconstruction, presented to you (somewhat) neat and finished and whole, Bakhtin's "clean man" [sic].

> " 'Secondary revision'" is 'the rearrangement of a dream so as to present it in the form of a relatively consistent and comprehensible scenario.' " (Gallop 21)

Are all theses the rearrangement of a dream, then?

It strikes me that this flight may be sophomoric, pretentious, calling attention, making a spectacle.[6] But I promised to (try to) be

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"honest," leaky pens, grocery lists, ambulance sirens, childishness and all.

> Clearly the mind is always altering its focus, and bringing the world into different perspectives. But some of these states of mind seem, even if adopted spontaneously, to be less comfortable than others. In order to keep oneself continuing in them one is unconsciously holding something back, and gradually the repression becomes an effort. (Woolf ROO 93)

Some of the ways in which I'd like to question the stability of language and, consequently, the stability of the autonomous individual, include the use of "metaphor-into-narrative" (Barreca); or making literal what has become symbolic; and the double or triple vision of a writer like Atwood presenting us with someone who is also a writer. There's also the tendency of these texts, like my own, to call attention to what Belsey calls "seams"-- as a disruptive and/or comic device: to show that "signifiers proceed from a source outside fiction" (or to

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6. "She" [the other woman] is making a spectacle out of herself.

> Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was of an exposure .... For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap -- a loose, dingy, bra strap especially -- were at once caught out by fate and blameworthy. It was my impression that these women had done something wrong, had stepped ... into the limelight out of turn -- too young or too old, too early or too late -- and yet anyone, any woman, could make a spectacle out of herself if she was not careful. (Russo 213)

> I could not think of myself as a writer until I risked exposing myself in my writing. (Torgovnic 27)

> "She doesn't want to be seen off camera, much less talk. Why would you say something off camera? What point is there in existing? [Warren Beatty on Madonna]
>
> But poor Warren was dating himself. There he was, tagged forever, as a member of a generation that actually draws a line, however often vindicated, however egotistically crossed, between life and art, between the private and public self. (Goodman, Columbus Dispatch June 13, 1991, my emph.)

demonstrate the Althusserean idea that we exist only in relation to institutions.

> "... if words may mean several things, general rules or maxims may prove less universal than they claim to be and lose their authority". (Jacobus quoted in Barreca 245)[7]

Can language, which determines so much of us, lose its authority, its power? How can feminist writers and critics turn language to their/our own ends? And is laughter a language in itself?[8]

> ... laughter here signals a sophisticated awareness of the vagaries of language and linguistic games as both problem and solution. (Lacombe 3-4)

INSTABILITY OF THE SELF AND LANGUAGE:

"Metaphor-into-narrative" and the loss of authority

Much feminist comedy entails "breaking the sentence." The sentence[9] as I envision it is not Woolf's debate on the female sentence, but like a PRISON sentence. Sentenced to write in one way, leaving aside all other possibilities. Sentenced to live in one way.

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[7] Woolf writes: "the truth [words] try to catch is many-sided, and they convey it by being themselves many-sided, flashing this way, then that" ("Craftsmanship," 151). Her belief in the instability of language is taken up most thoroughly by Atwood and Spark, two "interrogative" writers.

[8] Laughter as a "code," or as a language, holds great potential for the feminist. Robin Morgan describes "speaking feminism": "Feminism itself dares to assume that, beneath all our (chosen or forced) diversity, we are in fact much the same-- yet the ways in which we are similar are not for any one woman or group of women to specify, but for all of us, collectively, to explore and define-- a multiplicity of feminisms" (1).

[9] "We don't control the future of the profession only when we give grades or make hiring or tenure decisions; we control it at the level of the sentence" (Torgovnick 27).

"Breaking the sequence": breaking up, with laughter, with comedy, the idea that order is progress; sequence and hierarchy make sense, are logical, are the "best." The sequence of the story being broken. It can be shattered by mockery.[10] Sequence: do in order. Organize, tighten up, tidy up. Spark likes to "play with time"; one way of breaking the sequence.

Atwood plays with the script as written (The Edible Woman, Lady Oracle), with the honesty of the narrator (The Handmaid's Tale), with the sentence (in both senses) itself. Pym plays with the idea of being "sentenced to live in one way." Irving plays with our expectations. "Transgression" is a key idea for Irving, as it is for Bakhtin.[11]

> Woolf's "woman's sentence," then, has its basis not in biology, but rather in cultural fearlessness, in the attitude of critique -- a dissent from a self-conscious marking of dominant statement. It can be a stress shifting, the kind of realignment of emphasis noted by Nancy Miller, following Luce Irigaray,: 'an italicized version of what passes for the neutral or standard face ... a way of marking what has already been said ..." (Blau DuPlessis, Writing Beyond the Ending 33)

"Metaphor-into-narrative"[12] holds great potential for revolutionary feminists; it is upsetting to be taken literally. How many figures of speech are harmful, disturbing, distressing if taken at face value?

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[10] Margaret Drabble, in The Radiant Way and A Natural Curiosity, often mentions the "injustices" she will be doing to various characters and tells us why she leaves others out.

[11] Irving's work most overtly resembles Bakhtin's forms of carnival folk culture; for example, in The 158-Pound Marriage the narrator envisions himself in Brueghel's painting, and wants to call a novel about it The Quarrel Between Carnival and Lent. Bakhtin laments the diminishing influence of folk culture since Rabelaisian times, particularly the sharp divisions we now draw between the public and private body. This division of public ("spectacle") behavior and private ("personal") behavior has occurred in some dismissals of my four authors; that is, because Irving's and Atwood's novels can be bought at K-Mart and because Spark's and Pym's novels are often shelved with women's melodrama, they are too close to "the people."

[12] Regina Barreca defines this technique as taking words at face value, to take them at a level or meaning at which they were ostensibly intended. This technique shifts the stress from the symbolic ("looking

Children do this in countless serious and hilarious ways: at three, while I was watching cartoons, the picture suddenly went black. A deep, authoritative voice commanded, "PLEASE STAND BY." Fifteen minutes later, my mother came in to see me, crying and bored, standing by the TV set: "but he SAID to." And, of course, I had great trouble with "the way to a man's heart is through his stomach."

> Q.: Who looks exactly like Roseanne Barr naked?
> A.: Half of America.

This is a method of peeling back meanings, or of showing them in bas-relief, layer piled upon layer.

> (I need one of those transparencies like the kind you put over geographical maps to give them "relief"- relief map, relief text? -- double meaning, where mountains spring up at you, valleys recede, lakes show depth. A text with texture. Maybe not "the first Tampax in world literature" [Blau DuPlessis] but the first pop-up thesis?) Something to counteract Frye's "essentially unchanging human nature" and the text as a single whole.[13]

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up to men") to another meaning, the literal: actually, physically standing on your toes looking upward. This is one way of shattering the sequence.

[13] Frye's influence is important here because of his belief in human nature as basically static. Criticism is a way of finding a systematic framework and order, a way of reconciling various textual interpretations. As Belsey notes in her synopsis of Frye, he believes that a comprehensive understanding is to be striven for: "Ultimately, he urges, the plural meanings of the text are not in conflict with one another but complementary, each contributing to our understanding of the text as a (single) whole" (28).

Belsey contends that New Criticism's insistence on the "words in the text" contributed to the idea of language existing "on the page," static and fixed entities. Unchanging human nature ties to the question of language and meaning. Differences are believed to be "natural, given," but in reality they're constructed by the language itself.

> The world, which without signification would be experienced as a continuum, is divided up by language into entities which then readily come to be experienced as essentially distinct. (Belsey 40)

And Kolodny writes of female identity's "unique and multiplicitous realities" (qtd. in P. Smith 138)- so different from the unchanging essence of our ideology.

> (Enter a check written for dog food. Go mail my unemployment form. Add bleach to the wash.)

Feminist comedy reveals the "multiplicitous" nature of reality and of language, by being literal, by taking materially what is meant to be symbolic or representative.

> **Margaret Homans: "... the literal is traditionally classified as feminine ..."** (quoted in Barreca 245)[14]

Spark, in particular, has a disconcerting habit of employing metaphor-into-narrative: sometimes characters follow a social or religious rule to the literal letter (the letter of the law). Lise, in *The Driver's Seat*, knows that suicide will keep her from heaven. So she, nearly by sheer force of will, finds someone to murder her. In Spark's short story "Portobello Road," a character matter-of-factly comments, "He looked as if he would murder me, and he did" (29). Barreca gives some hilarious examples: a character gets her nickname from an incident where, lolling one day upon a haystack, she finds a needle. Later on, she is murdered; the headlines read, " 'Needle' found in haystack." Other feminist writers employ this technique in a wonderfully deadpan way. Fay Weldon's Ruth wants to "look up to men," and she does everything, physically, to insure that she does so. She

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The world's "natural" ordering, in other words, is arbitrary-- a sentence.

[14] Literal as down-to-earth or the "bodily lower stratum," as Bakhtin calls it, is closely linked to Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Their introduction makes this connection clear: "We have sought to describe both the experience that generates metaphor and the metaphor that creates experience" (xiii).

becomes a real "little woman."

> ("I'm sorry ... we only serve men in this room."
> "Good. Bring us two.")

In The Girls of Slender Means, Spark's first paragraph questions our understanding of terms like "nice," "rich," poor," and "spirit": "All the nice people were poor; at least, that was a general axiom, the best of the rich being poor in spirit" (7). It is a "truth universally acknowledged," as Austen would say, that women diet as if their lives depend on it. And, in The Girls of Slender Means, their lives do.[15]

The body, since it is material, is usually thought to be stable and fixed. But I want to question this interpretation of bodies, particularly of women's bodies, in conjunction with my questioning of the stable self. Because the substance of a woman's body is so unstable, through adolescence, the onset of menstruation and sexual maturity, pregnancy and post-pregnancy, lactation, menopause and aging, I believe that such multiple forms can reflect a multiplicity of identities. This multiplicity does not have to be negative (shape-changing is interesting), but society tends to view it as horrifying.

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[15] Many people are probably numb to the problems of anorexia and bulimia. However, I was surprised by the findings of an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control, which found that women who quit smoking gain an average of eight pounds. Dr. Williams "knows that, to some women, an extra 8 pounds is more than good health is worth." The article mentioned a recent survey finding that two-thirds of all overweight women are dieting, as are half of all normal-weight women (Columbus Dispatch, June 11, 1991). Another study "showed girls as young as 6 preferred playing with thin or normal-weight dolls rather than fat ones" (Dispatch, May 24, 1991). Dissatisfaction with one's body increases as girls get older, and a preoccupation with weight and diet occurs. "A major reason for the behavior is 'a clash between biology and society,' Hough [doctoral student conducting the study at OSU] believes" (Dispatch, May 24, 1991).

Another key theme is the idea of DIMENSION, measurements, rationing, proportion-- all important in World War II Britain, on physical and literal levels. Selina, as Alan Bold observes, rations moral resources as well, by exploiting moral slenderness and physical "thinness" for survival. But the waist and hip measurements are, in Spark's nightmarish world, paramount. The tardily exploded bomb and following fire make physical survival indistinguishable from slenderness. Only the slenderest and the most savage survive. Joanna Childe, who is neither physically nor morally slender, perishes in the fire while a bodily large but ethically slender Jane survives.

Economy, as in Brodie, is a key idea: Selina's body is "austere and economically furnished" (113), a body which is fed controlled and rationed amounts of food and which is sternly admonished to maintain poise and "perfect balance." Spark, by taking "straight," or literally, the importance of bodily measurements, manages to illustrate the less-than-perfect balance of prevalent values on slenderness of all kinds, of economy, of pretensions to control.[16] Fittingly, Selina loses her

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[16] As discussed in Chapter Two, control-- of emotions, of the body, of "messy" experience-- is an important aspect of the whole, complete, "clean" man in Renaissance ideology. Control and order are directly opposed to the violation and disappearance of boundaries essential in Rabelaisian and feminist comedies. For instance, mainstream society mocks those deemed overweight for "letting themselves go" (a common complaint in marriage-- she was pretty in high school, but now she's let herself go).

In their affirmation of dominant ideology and their advocacy of "completion," mainstream cinematic storylines are not substantially different from mainstream fiction. Silverman writes:

> The standard format of the classic cinematic text duplicates within the fiction as a whole the paradigm of the shot/reverse shot, disrupting the existing symbolic order, dislocating the subject-position within it, and challenging its ideas of coherence and fullness only in order subsequently to re-affirm that order, those positions, and those ideals. (221)

"equanimity of body and mind, complete composure whatever the social scene" (50); she screams uncontrollably when she last sees Nicholas. Later in her life a secretary screens all of her phone calls and she isolates herself from her friends. Perhaps she fears that to let herself - that is, her body and control of it-- get "out of bounds" or out of proportion will lead to a savagery like Jane's. Selina's world, as our own, is ruled by "survival of the fittest." She "fits" perfectly-- no necessity for using soap or margarine to slide through the eye of this needle.

This comparison applies very well to the classic or conservative comic text. Shakespearean comedy, for example, follows the cinematic paradigm exactly; there is a temporary sense of confusion and societal chaos; identities are doubted ("when I loved thee not, chaos did come again") and order is disrupted, but eventually all is smoothed over, completed, and resolved: "... the new order always turns out to have been the original order, temporarily interrupted" (Silverman 221). Silverman uses the familiar It's a Wonderful Life as an example, stating that the family and capitalism, as social structures, are questioned, even temporarily overthrown. At movie's end, however, these structures are re-validated. To use a more flashy example, in the movie Die Hard, Bruce Willis' wife asserts her independence by beginning to use her birth name and by finding a job as an executive at a Japanese company. After high-tech thieves take over her building and Bruce singlehandedly saves the day, he introduces her to a fellow police officer, using her birth name. She interrupts him sheepishly, saying that she wants to use HIS name again. Similarly, Joyce Hammond's analysis of gender inversion cartoons and feminism notes that while feminist and non- (or anti-) feminists alike employ the technique of gender inversion, or "woman on top," anti-feminist cartoons reaffirm the desirability of traditional roles. As Zemon Davis' research on images of disorderly women illustrates, the link between power and sex (in both a biological and relational sense) and the inversion of those relations has long been a theme in Western history: "Western legends and images of women dominating men have served as metaphors of chaos overcoming order as far back as the sixteenth century" (Hammond 151).

Chaos, or interruption, is an important concept in Silverman's "writerly texts-- texts which signify flux, not stable meaning, texts which strive for anarchy and defy closure. She uses the term "segmentation," with is implications of diffusion, bits and pieces, to explain the difference between readerly (linear) and writerly (interrupted) texts. Disruptive or writerly texts show "that signifiers proceed from a source outside fiction" (247). Contemporary feminist texts call our attention to their seams, their segments, and the arbitrariness of their language.

We all live under the threat of death; as Garp would say, we are all terminal cases. Memento Mori enlists the technique of metaphor-into-narrative to point out the literalness of this fact. Elderly people are told to "remember you must die." The reminder of mortality forces some to confront the fact that they have not lived well or fully; others, when receiving the "death threat," use it as an occasion to celebrate the years they have already had. The threat of death to the old-- a cliché-- is made, not a "valley of the shadow of death" but a literal message on the telephone (as Inspector Mortimer says, "I think the caller is Death himself"). We are forced to look at the phrase "death threat" in a completely new way.

you fit into me
  like a hook into an eye

a fish hook
  an open eye

Atwood's "fish hook/open eye" simile is one step removed from metaphor-as-narrative because it has not stated, literally, the connection between the two events. Novels like The Edible Woman, however, completely erase the "as if"; Marian is decorative; then she is consumed. Finally, she disappears. She is edible, not merely represented as such. Her anorexia, or at the very least her anxiety about eating, turns the metaphor of woman as "tasty morsel" into the literal truth.

Marian sees herself as edible early on in the novel-- but, strangely, also sees others as ripe for consumption. She burns, gobbles, gnaws, nibbles and gulps food throughout the first chapter; part of her job at a market research firm involves such things as "the laxative study in Quebec" ("It must be their collective guilt-complex. Or maybe the strain of the language problem; they must be horribly repressed" [16]), tasting canned pudding and administering tomato juice surveys and beer consumption questionnaires, and writing tactful replies to customers who have discovered insect life in their Raisin Bran ("... these little mistakes will happen" [21]). Her position in society is intimately connected with food. Peter, her fiancé, sees himself as plaid-jacketed hunter and adventurer; it's no coincidence that he bites Marian, or that her "hunts her down" in his tanklike car. Atwood's food imagery is well known: *The Canlit Food Book*, her prose poems "Simmering" ("sexual metaphor was changing: bowls and forks became prominent ...." [*Murder in the Dark* 32]), "Bread," "Strawberries," all play with notions of food and eating.

But here in *The Edible Woman* there's a flatness, a peculiar kind of straightforwardness. When she begins to dress for her engagement party, Marian chews first her dressing gown and then her own fingers; "Yum yum" is Peter's response to her new perfume, and when the philosophy instructor Joe talks about his wife's feminine role (it "demands passivity from her ...."),

> Marian had a fleeting vision of a large globular pastry, decorated with whipped cream and maraschino cherries, floating suspended in the air above Joe's head. (246)

Further, when Peter aims the camera at her, all she can see is a "snarl of teeth" (245). She is surrounded by hunters, harvesters, ripe for the plucking in her new red dress. Atwood is somehow able to "cut out the middleman" in this story; what began as symbolic-- woman as passive, as waiting to be hunted down and consumed, represented by the various dolls, steaks, rabbits, clothes present throughout the novel-- turns into a literal and factual event: Marian is being consumed (perhaps this is why so many nineteenth-century ladies "died of consumption"?). At novel's end, Marian decides to seize a voice, to make a statement, but she recognizes that "What she needed was something that avoided words, she didn't want to get tangled up in a discussion" (279). Barreca, in relating Lacan's theory of the symbolic order to "metaphor-into-narrative," writes

> The symbolic order-- the "highest" order-- is linked to the masculine and to language. To play with language, then, seems to be to play with the authority of the symbolic/masculine view. (254)

What Marian does is tantamount to Bakhtin's "lowering of the abstract to the earthy"; in the "spirit of degradation," or making the symbolic material, she bakes a sponge cake (incidentally, she grins into the mirror, "showing her teeth" [281] while doing this) in the shape of a woman, then she decorates it lavishly. As Peter has said to her, she now says to the cake, "You look delicious" (283). She plays with the idea (and ideal) of woman as tasty morsel. Peter rejects her offering-- presented to him as a "substitute, something you'll like much better" (284); she realizes that "[a]s a symbol it had definitely failed." With no further ado she begins with the feet and consumes it: "[t]he cake after all was only a cake" (285). Now it is Duncan, the graduate student, who gnaws on his thumb before tackling the cake and telling Marian that she is now a consumer instead of the consumed.

> (All this writing of gnawing and sponge cakes has made me inordinately hungry. Think I'll walk down for a candy bar.)

The playing with a symbol-- as you toy with the food on your plate-- is another way of undermining authority, a "play with the boundaries of meaning." Mashed potatoes and gravy can become a dam, then turn into mashed potatoes and gravy again (DON'T PLAY WITH YOUR FOOD!).[17] Here

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the cake is just a cake (a kiss is just a kiss), but we keep seeing it as double or triple; is it a failure as a symbol (as Peter sees it), Marian's rejection of her femininity (as Ainsley says), or a sign that Marian is back to reality, a consumer (Duncan's version)?

"Nonsense. It's just a cake."

> ... women seem forced to live more intimately with the metaphors that they have created. (Gilbert and Gubar 87)

Atwood's female characters live within metaphors: Marian feels consumed in a consumer society; therefore, she becomes anorexic, as if someone else is feeding off her (how much of anorexia, I wonder, can be attributed to women's timidity about TAKING UP SPACE physically or conversationally?).

> Listen to the voices of the women and the voices of the men; observe the space men allow themselves, physically and verbally .... [a woman student is] deprecating her own work by a reflex prejudgment: *I do not deserve to take up time and space*. (Rich 245)

(D. came home and described a long wait in a doctor's office where he had read an article on anorexia in a medical journal: it was "extremely rare" for a man to be anorexic. I was surprised that he was surprised.) Gilbert and Gubar write of particularly feminist metaphors: anorexia, bulimia, agoraphobia, disease. Like Marian, the bodies of anorexics diminish, as do their voices and their interest in taking up physical and verbal space.

Agoraphobia is another metaphor that is made literal by feminist writers to cross the threshold of the home is "not fitting" for a woman.

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17. For some enlightening discussions of cooking and eating in Atwood and Pym, see Atwood's interview with Bonnie Lyons in *Shenandoah* 37.2 (1987): 69-89 and Mary Anne Schofield's "Well-Fed or Well-Loved? -- Patterns of Cooking and Eating in the Novels of Barbara Pym," *University of Windsor Review* 18.2: 1-8.

Marcia Ivory, one-fourth of the Quartet in Autumn, is both anorexic and agoraphobic. She withdraws from both food and company, choosing "the extreme of minimal dealing with the world and with her own life" (Cotsell 127). Marcia withdraws into her house and self-imposed exile, coming out once to see her former coworkers and rarely to see her doctor. She is old, alone, poor, and eccentric: devalued by all in society, she makes herself disappear. Pieces of her go missing: like Atwood's Rennie Wilford, she loses a breast to cancer.[18] Later she eats less and less; she dwindles. After her nearly self-willed death, her ex-colleagues meet and divide up the stockpiled cans of food in her house.[19]

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[18] Amputation is a direct rebellion against the complete, "finished" individual. Rennie Wilford uses the occasion of her mastectomy for bizarre joking:

> How much of me did you cut off? ....
> About a quarter, he said gently.
> You make it sound like a pie, said Rennie (Bodily Harm 34).

I don't view this as masochistic joking, but rather an Offred-esque comment on how simultaneously cheap and invaluable a literal part of the body can be.

Similarly, Garp has a habit of noticing the damaged and the voiceless: "One-eyed and no-tongued, thought Garp, my family will pull together" (514). Duncan becomes a "one-eyed, one-armed painter" (597) who dies laughing at one of his own jokes, "surely a Garp-family thing to do" (605). Completion of the body is literally impossible with Rennie, Duncan, Ellen James and Roberta Muldoon.

Fragmentation of the social body happens in much feminist comedy, as in Spark's interrupted conversations and Atwood's disjointed scenes.

> ... for Woolf conventional meaning, because it attempts to impose unity, becomes exclusive and partial; only meaning that, like music, lacks definite articulation is fully inclusive and therefore truly unifying. (Cuddy-Keane 282)

[19] I would contend that Woolf's "Angel in the House" is actually agoraphobic. If she wanted to look like an angel-- thin, ethereal, transparent, no elastic digging in anywhere-- no doubt she dieted too. Chesler, in Women and Madness, describes women who fear eating, who are incarcerated in asylums for rejecting food or motherhood or other things

Barreca describes Fay Weldon's _Words of Advice_: a daughter takes her father's words at face value. When her father tells her to "run along," she does.

> ... run along, from the very first day she rose from crawling position .... eventually she became good at running, and made a very fine wing at hockey ... (54 quoted in Barreca 249)

As Barreca says, she "takes [her father's] language and literally runs away with it" (249). For such metaphors as this and others to be taken "straight" is sometimes horrible, but it is also deeply funny. For feminist authors to "play with authority" of language is a profoundly courageous act, for it forces readers to recognize the many possible layers of interpretation in a text, a paragraph, or a simple expression ("Run along," "Diet as if your life depended on it," "Woman's place is in the home").

"A landslide in the mind": Pym's linguistic unbalancing act

Pym's characters have an unbalancing way of taking offhand remarks or "poetic" literary quotations literally, or analyzing their origins when their speakers never intended them as anything more than background chatter. Her characters never glide along the surface of a conversation; they worry a phrase or a sentence, shaking it up and down until it surrenders several different meanings. Characters not only

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"normal" (see Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper"). They are "treated like a woman" and sentenced to celibacy and passivity: sanctioned agoraphobia. (And is this why women attempt suicide most often through so-called passive methods?-- starvation, drowning, pills, poisons?) For a female to be agoraphobic is for her to do what she is told: stay in the house. To be anorexic is merely to follow directions: be thin, don't take up space, be contained. To be claustrophobic is only a reaction against being confined: anxieties about _space_-- physical space-- are still prevalent in feminist writing (from the "Red Room" scene in _Jane Eyre_ to the "Ceremony" scenes in _The Handmaid's Tale_).

lament the ineffectiveness of language to express strong emotion, but also its susceptibility to different "readings."

> Perhaps there can be too much making of cups of tea, I thought, as I watched Miss Statham filling the heavy teapot .... Did we really need a cup of tea? I even said as much to Miss Statham and she looked at me with a hurt, almost angry look. "Do we need tea?" she echoed. "But Miss Lathbury ..." She sounded puzzled and distressed and I began to realize that my question had struck at something deep and fundamental. It was the kind of question that starts a landslide in the mind. (ExW 211)

Pym's questions, her unmarriage plots, her emphasis on the material aspects of life-- jumble sales, food, clothes, tea (what Cotsell grandly calls her "ethical and lively commitment to the ordinary world" [12])-- these quiet characters with their small questions do start a subtly subversive landslide in the mind. Mildred, in particularly, dryly questions conventional wisdom: "I don't know whether spinsters are really more inquisitive than married women, though I believe they are thought to be because of the emptiness of their lives ..." (9). She, and other Pym women, particularly the Bede sisters, also deny the emphasis placed on women as romantic heroines. Mildred questions the linking of happiness-- a "full life"-- to successfully capturing a husband and living up to "the sentence, the sequence" of romance narrative.

Another way of breaking the sequence is to use domestic events as kind of a code for happiness (speaking of domestic detail: "How long has this green pepper been in the fridge?" "Is that what that is?"). Belinda Bede has a lovely propensity for having "one of those sudden moments of joy that sometimes come to us in the middle of the day" (STG 50). It is almost a reverse of a Joycean epiphany, since the circumstances are ordinary, even mundane, small felicities of everyday life: being forgiven for a caterpillar in the cauliflower. As Cotsell notes, we live more closely with Pym's women; the intimacy of day-to-day life (small developments, awkwardnesses, cooking, cleaning) makes us more intimate than the relation of "the occasional cataclysmic event" (94).

The comedy of these day-to-day events often comes from the incongruity of juxtaposing two kinds of insight (often, though not always, one male and one female). Keble's "trivial round, the common task," Belinda supposes, was written in a study well-dusted by some servant, not at all "the same thing as standing at the sink with aching back" (STG 228).

It's good for the soul to imagine literary greats doing housework: Hemingway in apron, wielding a feather duster ("It was a clean. It was a good clean."); Faulkner vacuuming (the "avatar" of housework); Dickens cleaning toilets (only if Barkis is willin'); Edgar Allan Poe putting in fabric softener while composing to the rhythm of the washer ("It was many and many a year ago ..."); Norman Mailer ... what's the absolute WORST I can give him?

Like Joan Delacourt giving Bertrand Russell a bit part in Escape from Love, guiltily knowing Arthur would be appalled: " 'Trivializing,'" he would have called it .... 'What about Mrs. Marx?' I would say .... I would go into the kitchen and fantasize about the home life of Marx. 'Not tonight, dear, I have a headache, you intellectuals are all the same, mooning around, why don't you get out there and make something of yourself, god knows you have the talent'" (LO 168). This is another way of breaking the sequence, the circle of fear, the sentencing to conformity. When you're afraid of someone-- the dentist, the drivers' ed. teacher, a job interviewer-- my mother said, imagine them in their underwear (now you know how I got through my candidacy exam). The "comedy of juxtaposition" is effective in peeling away layers of meaning.

> The sense of surface and undercurrents in social discourse is ... characteristic of Pym's narrative style. [Pym's women are] socially perfect but with an alluring hint of subversive feelings and thoughts which never quite constitute a threat. (Cotsell 30)

I disagree with the latter part of Cotsell's statement; Pym's women's subversion is, actually, and actively, a threat to the status quo. Pym's great talent for communicating the layers (palimpsest?) of ordinary conversation is not quite metaphor-into-narrative. But it is a technique which makes us think carefully about the implications of common expressions and everyday banalities, the meanings that bubble below commonplaces. (A condescending reviewer of Pym writes that "Women like Mildred [take] almost nothing for granted" [Kapp 238], and this certainly goes for conversation)-- the "whirls and eddies in the silent mind" (Duchene 1096). When, for instance, Harriet describes Edith as a "decayed gentlewoman," Belinda denies the trite phrase-- "Nobody could call Edith decayed and sometimes one almost forgot she was a gentlewoman"; she then wonders why one always labels Edith as "splendid" -- "probably because she hadn't very much money ..." (13). When discussing arrangements for lavatories, the Archdeacon muses, "The Place behind the Toolshed, what a sinister sound that has" (28). In a showy discussion of anthropology, the Bishop mentions the decline of anthropological terms: " 'lineage, sib, kindred, extended family ...' 'What is a sib?' asked Harriet. 'It sounds a nice, friendly kind of thing ... a biscuit, perhaps.'" Pym deftly needles the pompous Bishop: he merely shakes his head and does not reply, "either because he did not deign to be associated with present-day anthropological terminology or because he did not really know what a sib was" (*STG* 206).

Pym enjoys playing games with language: this is shown, partly, through her liberal use of literary allusions. In Jane's (*J&P*) case, these are almost always inappropriate or somehow embarrassing. Or these imposing, grand, uplifting and very traditional quotations are rudely interrupted by daily life.

> " 'My heart was dead,
> Dead of devotion and tired memory ....'
> Look, that's my bus and I think I can get it if I run" (*J&P* 49).

> " 'Oh Love they wrong thee much
> That say thy sweet is bitter ...'"
> Dora looked at me in astonishment. "I think I'd just like to go into the Ladies," she said, "before we get the bus home". (*ExW* 108)

The Archdeacon quotes, at length, *The Grave* in a Sunday sermon. Belinda likes this, but is "uneasily conscious that the Archdeacon had been preaching for nearly half an hour, and she began to worry about the beef" (*STG* 110). Pym attempts to "break the sentence"; by juxtaposing "Great Thoughts" and everyday life, she shows how one is not more important to the other, and that the one attributed to women ("the trivial round") is almost always ignored by Keble, Milton, and other traditional writers.[20]

Like Pym's characters, other feminists have to be ever-vigilant about language and all its layers. But it gets so *wearing* sometimes: in the fall, I will teach Freshman Composition and Masterpieces of Literature, to students who take a core course in Man and His Environment. (As Mildred caustically observes of an anthropologist's room that is scattered with journals, they bear "the rather stark and surprising title of Man. I wondered what they could be about"). To be so watchful is draining: manhole? sewer hole? alderman? city councillor?

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[20] When women writers *do* portray their own experience, it's often judged as insignificant. "This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room" (Woolf, *ROO*). Russ calls this label "*She wrote it, but look what she wrote about*" (40). Kaja Silverman puts this hierarchy on a grander scale, writing that in the bourgeois tradition, "... individual man is understood to be most himself, truest to his nature, when he transcends materiality through religion, art, or philosophy, thereby approaching abstract values like the Divine, the Beautiful, and the Good" (126).

> Women artists can't find "self-in-world" except by facing (affronting) and mounting an enormous struggle with the cultural fictions-- myths, narratives, iconographies, languages-- which heretofore have delimited the representation of women. (Blau DuPlessis 262-3)

> Cynthia Fuchs Epstein: "Cultural restraints are acting on you all the time .... You have to be on the alert every second". (Shapiro 61)

You get so tired of fighting the language, the assumptions; besides, you say, wimping out, I don't want to alienate anyone, or be known as a nut, or make things difficult (as a course coordinator said after a revision of his title, "You realize this makes me 'Fresh Chair'"). So how to write, how to act? ("How to be? How to be-have?" [Blau DuPlessis 260])

> ... Kostash aims to foster self-aware writers unafraid to bring the personal into a story, writers who can create "verbal collages" in an attempt to convey the multiplicity of facts and views that is the "reality"; of any "reported" situation. (Interview with Myrna Kostash by L. VanLuven, Edmonton Journal August 5, 1989 E6)

This is one solution-- verbal collage, like the pictorial ones we made in grade school: an attempt at showing multiplicity or swirling together of facts and what colors them.

> Stein says we no longer have the words people used to have so we have to make them new in some way but women haven't had them at all and how can you deconstruct a language you never constructed or it was never constructed by others like you, or with you in mind? (Jaffer quoted in Blau DuPlessis 260)

Words tumbling out one after another; they sound random, impressionistic; yet they are so arbitrary. What I said about institutions, traditions making things happen, before we know what's happening: Althusser's Name-of-the-Father applied to a child before it's born -language determining and limiting us (as Offred is determined by a label, a name).[21] To turn these arbitrary images inside out-- to declare, boldfaced, that women's survival does depend on their measurements, or that young women are physically consumed by society's expectations, is to make the Father worry about his own name: how did he get it in the first place?

Making real what is figurative is at the heart of metaphor-into-narrative. Irving's "silent woman," Ellen James, is more than a symbol. Instead of representing, "standing for," the voicelessness of the outsider (as other minor characters with speech impediments-- Mr. Tinch and Alice Fletcher-- as well as people struggling with a second language might), Ellen James is physically and literally made voiceless by male violence. At the age of eleven she is raped by two men; so that she won't be able to describe them to police, they cut out her tongue.

Ellen James' voice is stolen from her. But with the loss of her tongue, she seizes another way: she develops one hell of a writing muscle.

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[21] Language has been used as propaganda to cloud the issue of surrogate motherhood. Ms. (May-June 1991) gives several examples of "Reprospeak." The habit of determining the value of something through its name ties in with the patriarchal practice of giving children their fathers' surname, and even his first name-- Pete Rose Jr. Silverman describes the effects of the paternal signifier being so internalized that it is inscribed into the fabric of Western culture and supported by the patriarchal family, by the legal, medical, religious, technical, and educational institutions (Silverman 184).

> She opened her mouth and pointed to the wide absence in there. Garp cringed.
>
> I want to talk; I want to say everything,
> wrote Ellen James. Garp noticed that the gnarled thumb and index finger of her writing hand were easily twice the size of the unused instruments on her other hand .... No writer's cramp for Ellen James, he thought. (509)

Ellen becomes "a good poet and an ardent feminist" (586). On the reading circuit, Roberta Muldoon the transsexual reads aloud while Ellen listens, "looking as if she were wishing very hard that she could say her own poems" (586). Because of physical and psychological damage inflicted by hatred, Ellen has to find another way-- writing-- and must cede her speaking voice to someone else. But her ability to "speak" through writing is like the one-eyed Duncan's ability to "see" through photography and painting; both are able to communicate their writerly visions of the world.

Roberta Muldoon and the parade of selves

Roberta Muldoon: a great metaphor. Like Woolf's man and woman getting into a cab together, Roberta is androgynous, a former player for the Eagles who undergoes a sex-change operation. The "tight end with tits" becomes a member of Jenny's contingent and part of the loosely knit family of Helen and Garp. Roberta is an outsider like Ellen James, and, like Ellen, receives hate mail from various "Legitimate Couples," macho men, and Total Women.[22] Roberta's literal transsexuality brings up a key to much feminist comedy: the transformation of a "single" identity (pro football player #90) to a rapid and multiple succession of selves: bodyguard, surrogate mother to Duncan, caretaker of injured women, school board chair, softball player, Fields Foundation director, lover, friend, and truth-speaker:

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[22] Sign at an Ohio Jesuit school forced by finances to admit girls: "BETTER DEAD THAN CO-ED."

> Approaching fifty, she would remark to Helen that she suffered the vanity of a middle-aged man and the anxieties of a middle-aged woman, "but," Roberta added, "this perspective is not without advantages. Now I always know what men are going to say before they say it." (593)

> In her late fifties she was becoming forgetful of using her estrogen .... The lapses in her estrogen, and her stepped-up running, made Roberta's large body change shape, and change back again, before Helen's eyes.
>
> "I sometimes don't know what's happening to you, Roberta," Helen told her.
>
> "It's sort of exciting," Roberta said. "I never know what I'm going to feel like; I never know what I'm going to look like, either." (590)

> Perhaps to think as I had been thinking these two days, one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of the mind. Now that effort had ceased and that unity had been restored by seeing two people come together and get into a taxi-cab. (Woolf ROO 92)

But how does one find this unity? So many critics are puzzled by that taxi-cab passage: is Woolf pleading for bisexuality, for androgyny, for peace between the sexes? I think that she is declaring a strong desire for more Roberta Muldoons. Not the stereotype of "a strong man who isn't afraid to cry," a sort of Alan Alda/Bo Jackson (God forbid), but one who is not afraid to laugh. Laughter would unite the two in the taxi-cab, as it simultaneously unites and heals Garp's children. ("There's no sex like transsex!" they shout as they salute Roberta Muldoon after her death.) And Duncan imagines how Roberta would mock her own eulogies by football commentators:

> Garp would mimic the announcer: "She didda lot for refashioning da vagina!"
>
> "Ha!" Roberta would roar. (602)[23]

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[23] On the matter of being trapped in the wrong body: Peter Ackroyd's Dressing Up posits the possibility that male transexuals think of

Nonetheless, laughter here overturns and undoes the strict unwavering lines drawn between the sexes. Roberta's literal transsexuality is yet another liminal, "in-between" event. She was born male, with thirty years of male conditioning, yet biologically she is a woman. For us to realize that Roberta is "really" transsexual, that Ellen "really" has no tongue is to begin dismantling language itself.

> "You mean this Ellen James Society goes around not talking," Garp said, "as if they didn't have any tongues?"
> "No, I mean they don't have any tongues," Jenny said. (191)

Regina Barreca writes, "There is an implication that the world of 'as if' and the world of 'as is' is not, in fact, separated by anything except perception and acknowledgment" (248), much like Spark's seeming eccentric contention that there is no line separating the natural and the supernatural. So we get the "evil" or the frightening as merely comic (as I've mentioned, both Woolf and Spark believed that to see Hitler as comic, as a ridiculous figure, was a good way of handling the

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themselves as both feminine and female, and that to undergo a transsexual operation is to give rigid gender roles their ultimate tribute. Also I read Gloria Steinem's article on Renee Richards; that she was used "as a handy testimony to the desirability of the traditional female role" (235) and that some such "trapped" individuals are forced into self-mutilation by the biases around them. And PBS' Documentary "P.O.V.: Man into Woman" included testimony from the subject about wanting to let his "softer" side free; how he hadn't felt free to let his so-called "feminine" side be revealed. So the issue is more complicated than I've suggested. On the one hand, a physical transsexual operation is courageous because the patient declares that chromosomes don't matter; on the other hand, s/he is saying that chromosomes matter terribly much. I think that they are trapped inside, not the wrong body, but dominant ideology. "Sentenced" to be one or the other. It would have been easier to pretend I hadn't been thinking about this, that Roberta remains representative of only one thing-- the admirable desire for transformation. But is all transformation (bodily or otherwise) necessarily good? Hasn't Roberta just bought into the ultimate delusion of the patriarchy? Like Steinem, I defend the right of Renee Richards to alter her body if that's what she wants to do, but "if the shoe doesn't fit, must we alter the foot?")

horror he inspired). Hence, the voice of Death, rather anti-climactically, is a voice on the telephone; "savagery" is embodied in a beautiful woman stealing a designer dress; Jean Brodie's danger is labeled by Sandy as "ridiculous."[24]

(I feel as if I'm dancing around the subject of subjectivity-- dancing through a minefield, indeed.)

Comedy, nonsense, puns-- all depend on this way of seeing language as something arbitrary, meanings decided by someone else. Even the most ordinary of jokes demand this, although the suspension of logic ("as is") is only temporary ("as if"). After that, with an ordinary joke, you snap back to "reality"; the joke is dismissed. (I won't attempt to analyze a joke here; Freud does this in _Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious_ and they're incredibly awful. But in case I'm getting too esoteric):

Q. Why is pubic hair curly?
A. Because you'd poke your eyes out otherwise.

This way of disturbing readers is comedic; it also "messes up" the interpretation, the mind-set, we have planned out. Comedy posits, through disruption, another possibility, another reality. Instead of "natural" progression of events, a "realistic" (that is, "lifelike") narrative, Spark _et al._ deny strict realism to fulfill the comic-- or comic grotesque-- potential of events or characters. At times the exaggeration, or understatement, is so slight as to be unnoticeable,--

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[24] This again brings up feminists' belief in the power of ordinary material things. Pym's characters "encode" happiness in food and comfort; Spark's make the eccentric commonplace (the devil is a sociologist in a Peckham factory); Woolf's straight equation with a room of one's own and five hundred a year equaling independence is well known. ("Even allowing a generous margin for symbolism, ... a lock on the door means the power to think for oneself .... Intellectual freedom depends upon material things" [_ROO_ 101, 103]).

Miss Brodie might be a bit "over the top," we say, but we have all encountered someone "like her"; Jenny Fields is a little "flat," maybe, but she is "believable" (or as Jillsy Sloper might say, "It feels so true. Yeah! That's how damn people behave all the time"). Bakhtin writes of the "DIZZYING" effect of Rabelaisian comedy, where the ground under one's feet becomes alien. Sometimes the reader is only a little dizzy, sometimes the ground looks deceptively familiar; true of feminist comedy-- instead of reproducing what is "familiar," as the advertising industry does (to use Belsey's example) and which leads to a narrowing of possibilities, feminist comedy asks us to consider a broadened set of possibilities-- possibly paradoxical or contradictory ones.[25] So far I've been concentrating on the different meanings of phrases and words--

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[25] Contradiction is unlikely under dominant ideology because it is unfamiliar: "[A]uthors produce meaning out of the available system of differences, and texts are intelligible in so far as they participate in it" (Belsey 44). A text's "value," to a large degree, depends upon how conventional its style or how familiar its storyline. Joanna Russ attacks the problem from this angle:

> One side of the nightmare is that the privileged group will not recognize that "other" art, will not be able to judge it, that the superiority of taste and training possessed by the privileged critic and the privileged artist will suddenly vanish.
>
> The other side of the nightmare is not that what is found in the "other" art will be incomprehensible, but that it will be all too familiar. That is:
>
> Women's lives are the buried truth about men's lives.
>
> The lives of people of color are the buried truth about white lives.
>
> The buried truth about the rich is who they take their money from and how.
>
> The buried truth about "normal" sexuality is how one kind of sexual expression has been made privileged, and what kinds of unearned virtue and terrors about identity this distinction serves. (118-19)

> The sense that language is self-referential and that the apparently immovable structures of reality can be undermined and shaken apart: these are the lasting effects of metaphor-into-narrative. (Barreca 252)

and, I'd add, feminist comedy in general.

Here Barreca discusses one of Spark's characters analyzing the phrase "warning siren," and how the first meaning of the word has changed to reflect more frightening times while retaining a flavor of the old meaning. In a small scene from *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, the questioning of language is put to use in mocking the conformity of one of the students:

> ... Eunice was absent, she had pleaded off because of something else she had to attend which she described as "a social."
> "Social what?" said Miss Brodie, *who always made difficulties about words when she scented heresy*.
> "It's in the church hall, Miss Brodie."
> "Yes, yes, but social what?" (62, my emph.)

Spark has a great propensity for making readers shift focus, to peel back layers: Sandy Stranger is Sister Helena of the Transfiguration, one who transfigures the commonplace; one of Miss Brodie's pupils calls this ability "a sense of the hidden possibilities in all things" (81).

This sense of hidden possibilities-- potentials that become revealed, partially or wholly, through the comedy of metaphor-into-narrative, is probably most evident in the minimalist life of Offred. She is given very little to "transfigure"; she has extremely limited powers to change her behavior or her surroundings. Outward rebellion is impossible; in a theocracy, contradictions and ambiguities threaten the status quo. But Offred still manages to convey a sense of ambiguity and "blurriness" through her relationship with language, something that is characteristic of Atwood's writing, as Frank Davey observes:

> Atwood's mistrust of the "received language" of conventional human speech, in fact, often leads her to create works that are gardens of textual delights. Almost all of her work has subtexts either implied or embedded within it ... (162)

Implying, embedding, layering: isn't there a better word for what's happening here? Finally, in all my complaints about language, I can say yes. Michele Lacombe, in an article on The Handmaid's Tale, picks up on Offred's use of the word "PALIMPSEST" at the beginning of the novel to describe the "layers of signification" (4) in Offred's description of the gymnasium at the Red Centre. In a happy coincidence, I also found this term prominent in The Madwoman in the Attic; my notes say palimpsestic writing equals "surface designs concealing and/or obscuring deeper, less accessible (less socially acceptable?) levels of meaning" (73). A century later: can we be any more straightforward? Does this text, here ("this-here text") do this too?-- what is embedded in this spinning, churning bunch (bouquet?) of words? Being pissed off in February, worrying about money, phones ringing, mail arriving, putting "so much stress on money and a room of one's own" (105).

The subject is always-already contaminated by patriarchy. No getting around that. So how is it possible to start clean? (Like my laments about wanting to keep my/our children unpoisoned from the disease of sexism, but also knowing that it is impossible, since I've been poisoned, like some chemical contaminant that lives on in the genes, in the fatty tissues). It is not possible to begin again-- so what is the "best"-- least harmful-- thing to do? Again I advocate, prescribe, inoculate with comedy.

These feminist comics can do untold damage to the status quo. A storyteller can indicate what has been (contradicting official history, as much feminist fiction does), what is ("It may well be that, as well-taught types, we are accustomed to telling the truth only about the unimportant or at least-- and they often coincide-- the unembarrassing" [Rorison Caws 193]) and what could be. The storyteller is historian and anti-historian, an imaginer of possibilities. She is inflammatory. Her thievery of language is so dangerous, and so threatening, because it posits another reality, another possibility.

For a feminist to appropriate the pen is, in a basic sense, comic. Susan Gubar, in "'The Blank Page' and Issues of Female Creativity," discusses the penis-as-pen metaphor, "writing onto the virgin page" (77); Atwood, in The Handmaid's Tale, mocks this through a Gileadean ban on women's writing, in shorthand called Pen Is Envy. (She carries this joke further in Cat's Eye, when the narrator's brother "writes in pee .... He does this methodically, as if it's important to do it well, the pee arching delicately out from the front of his swim trunks, from his hand and its extra finger .... he writes: MARS. Or, if he's feeling up to it, something longer: JUPITER. By the end of the summer he has done the whole solar system, three times over, in pee" [72].) And Offred describes herself as "hard, white and granular" and people like herself: "We lived in the blank white spaces at the edges of print. It gave us more freedom" (53). Many times throughout the novel she puts herself in the place of something blank and white: a ceiling, an egg, a blank white page.

But Offred reads, or at the very least, decodes: she listens at doors, she wants "an exchange, of sorts" (11); any kind of talk would be welcome, but since she is not allowed this, she "wastes not." ("In the absence of writing, the environment presents itself as a new language to be decoded" [Lacombe 9].) On her first shopping trip she notes the signs covered over with paint: All Flesh, marked with a wooden pork chop hanging from two chains; Milk and Honey, signified by three eggs, a bee, and a cow. She uses her memory to decode what places had once been: a movie theatre, a lingerie shop; in a way, she writes her own version on top of the official one. She discovers two pieces of writing in her room, the cushion that reads "FAITH" and the scratched-in sentence in pig Latin on her closet floor.

> The comic irony of Atwood's gospel is that as Offred sits brooding on "FAITH," "HOPE" and "CHARITY" hatch (words that keep turning up in the tale). At any rate, for a bad joke to be the good news is the kind of absurdly hopeful reversal (as in Jesus' wittier parables) that we find often in this surprisingly funny book. (Larson 498)

In The Handmaid's Tale, reproduction of various kinds occurs: most important is the physical replication of Offred's story-- first the spoken narrative, which is disguised as various pop music cassettes ("'Twisted Sister at Carnegie Hall' is one of which I am particularly fond" [284]), which in turn are mislabeled and disarranged at the bottom of the box. The idea of Offred's voice being mislabeled-- by whom exactly?-- is an intriguing one, suggesting the layers of her story being misunderstood by men in power, past and present, and even her possible listeners.

Her meetings with the Commander are imbedded with innuendo and crosscurrents; their conversations are tests of a kind. She first sees the scribbled sentence as a message, a prayer, a command. This was her own "reading," her private and visceral reaction to the message left by an unknown woman: "Sometimes I repeat the words to myself. They give me a small joy." She even constructs an identity for her predecessor: she is "the lively one .... with freckles" (50). Offred finds this writing, the communication, "in the closet, where the darkest shadow fell," while "reading" her room for signs of previous occupants. It is after Offred's "birth in mirth"-- her hysterical laughter in that closet-- that she gathers together the courage to ask the Commander for a translation of the message left by her predecessor: "Nolite te bastardes carborundorum." In her master's house, his study, it becomes a "sad graffito, scrawled once, abandoned" (174); he has the power to control her reading of the vanished woman and her exhortation. But the woman and the unknown embroiderer of the "FAITH" cushion-- both writers, of a sort-- initiate Offred back into the possibilities of reading and writing, and, perhaps even more importantly, the possibilities of joking.

> "That's not real Latin," he says. "That's a joke."
> "A joke?" I say, bewildered now. It can't be only a joke. Have I risked this, made a grab at knowledge, for a mere joke? (174)

Her predecessor, although she had to keep her writing "in the closet," grabbed the Commander's joke away from him-- "Don't let the bastards grind you down"-- and invested it with her own (and other Handmaids') meaning. Offred, in order to translate the joke, is given the pen (temporarily) by the Commander:

> The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost. I can feel the power, the power of the words it contains. Pen Is Envy, Aunt Lydia would say, quoting another Centre motto, warning us away from such objects. And they were right, it is envy. Just holding it is envy. I envy the Commander his pen. It's one more thing I would like to steal. (174)

And steal she does. Though her story is tampered with by historians and literary archaeologists, it lives on. As Lacombe says, "Offred's memoir testifies to the power of writing as speech-act, breaking the dialectic of power by its very existence. In a world where writing is banned and women are silenced, she needs an auditor to exist, even if she is her own sole reader ..." (17). Offred has broken the sequence of silence by telling the tale.

> Offred's identity is indicated by her "bloody nun" costume instead of by her real name. In Gilead she is "Offered" in a blood sacrifice that fails; "Of Fred" in lieu of his barren wife; and "Off-red" as a secret rebel. She is also "off-red" or misread both by her Commander and by the academic historian who reconstructs her "strange" manuscript. (Lacombe 7-8)

The scholar who finds the tapes works feverishly and meticulously to assemble the tapes in the "correct" and "logical" order, although they and we will never know Offred's "true" intentions in writing this many-layered text. But the academic male is determined to make her make sense, imposing his own law upon her, just as the Commander has. That is, Professor Pieixoto tries to put the broken sentence back together again; he tries to pin down her identity, frustrated that all Offred tells us is her age, some physical characteristics, and her place of residence: "She does not see fit to supply us with her original name" (287). Several people in Gilead, including Moira, Nick, and some of the Red Centre indoctrinees, know Offred's name-- it is a kind of code to distinguish outsiders from insiders, true believers from Mayday sympathizers.

For her to tell the story at all is a comic reversal (this is reinforced by its juxtaposition with "the official story" of Professor Pieixoto). But within the text itself, there is also much that is comic. And this comedy is able to break down traditional ideas about "the individual," a single entity, or "the free unconstrained author of meaning and action, the origin of the story" (Belsey), a single, unified seed or core expressing itself-- self-expression, liberating one consistent self-- to a new and radical idea of the subject (as Paul Smith explains, in the sense of being "a British subject," under certain laws and expectations). Revolutionary comic texts, especially feminist ones, challenge ideas of coherence (one reason why so-called "nonsense" or "gibberish" is often used-- maybe it should be called "anti-sense"?) and the readers' place within the text. Atwood suggests this when Offred and the Commander play with words in Scrabble; first they use requisite language: words like prolix and quartz, with the Commander (since he has sole access to written word) looking up correct spellings and allowed words. Eventually they make up nonsense syllables for their language games. In this transgression against order and coherence, readers are left open-mouthed, gasping, upset, with no solid ground under their feet. Glenys Stow examines nonsense in The Edible Woman, and quotes a revealing passage from Elizabeth Sewell:

> [Nonsense] may be used by logicians to describe some contradiction in a system, by scientists to describe statements which supposedly do not tally with the known facts, by modern philosophers to describe sentences which seem to them to depart from the rules for making sense in the use of language. (95)

Nonsense plays with laws, with rules, and with the way things are supposed to be; "people who act in a nonsensical way are seen as different from the norm, strange, and perhaps threatening" (Stow 95). Within her limited scope, Offred herself acts (thinks) nonsensically. Duncan, who questions words and acts as a clown or a wise fool, makes Marian question the "script" that is laid down for her. In such texts, nothing is familiar any more; instead of an unchanging core or a stable and fixed identity; what we are presented with is

> female self-consciousness turning in upon itself attempting to grasp the deepest conditions of its own unique and multiplicitous realities. (Kolodny qtd. in P. Smith 137)

This is upsetting because contradictory, paradoxical: Offred isn't consistent, my students whined. Why can't she tell the story right the first time? Why is she lying? Why does she add in imaginary murder, fake lightning, nonexistent emotion?

One of the things Atwood, through her characters, most consistently attacks in her comedy is the extent to which characters decide on an image (or identity) and cling to it stubbornly, no matter what outside forces or inner voices are pulling on her: Marian has chosen the image of competent, cheerful fiancee; Ainsley the rebel-- but somehow these roles are reversed at novel's end. Their ideal images are prescribed for them by patriarchal society; it is impossible to escape fully the endless parade of images in advertisements (which Marian early in the novel studies intently), movies, market research, even in one's own mirror (there are cameras and mirrors aplenty in The Edible Woman). What these "poisoned" characters need, more often than not, is laughter: the irrational vision of nonsense and comedy.

Nonsense can be transformative. (Stow 96)

Bakhtin calls laughter an interior form of truth (it sounds strangely like Woolf's wrist chronometer or, less elegantly, Franny Berry's shit detector). Laughter, says Bakhtin, "liberates not only from external censorship but first of all from the great interior censor" (94), the interior censor being embedded, placed there by the patriarchy. I think that once Offred has her episode of "hysterical" laughter she becomes freer in her mind and more able to question and, eventually, to resist.

"A World of One's Own": Writers within comic texts

> According to Bebe, the hero becomes an artist "only after he has sloughed off the domestic, social, and religious demands imposed upon him by his environment. Narrative development in the typical artist-novel requires that the hero test and reject the claim of love and life, of God, home and country, until nothing is left but his true self and his consecration as an artist." (6) [quoted in Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending* fn 38 p. 224]

> I've taken some pleasure in being a sort of homebody. It's one of those things that appeals to me ... that I simply didn't have to be as absent as a lot of parents have to be, and I like that. When I had, suddenly, the means to get myself a studio, an office, or someplace to go and shut myself in, I simply did not want to avail myself of that. (John Irving, interview by Miller 176)

> Good literature, what her teachers would call good literature, was not involved with the world. To be involved with the world is lower than not to be. The world is a cesspool, flesh was base, spirit and mind are exalted. A descent into the world of matter was like bathing a clean body in a muddy pool. (French 28)

Several things are working in Bebe's neat "portrait of the artist": that the artist, like his academic and religious counterparts, must ignore the ordinary, the domestic, the personal, the down-to-earth;[26] that Bogus Trumper, Garp, Joan Delacourt and other artists portrayed in novels must follow a certain straight and narrow path to be successful; and that such a thing as a "true self" exists. I want to explore the ways in which authors of feminist comedy use writers as characters in their own work. Do Atwood's and Irving's writers like Joan Delacourt and Garp cling to the idea of a "core" identity as they write, or do they give us unstable or multilayered characters? Do they use writing to give themselves another identity in the parade? Do writers of feminist comedy reject the notion of a "true self"? Since writing is very often seen as "self expression," can feminist and comic writing be revised as a release or expression of selves?

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[26] Like the dismissal of Emily Dickinson as "madcap," (Russ 56), and of various feminist comics as silly or irrelevant, Anne Tyler's novels have routinely been labeled "zany" or magical," partly because of their concern with "mere" domestic drama. Mary F. Robertson argues that Tyler is a victim of false naming; that rather than emphasizing the power of the family and the satisfactoriness of such a social structure, Tyler's work disrupts conventional expectations of family novels and dislodges the idea of the enclosed family-- although exactly the opposite has been posited by mainstream critics. Her novels' progress is "felt more as an expansion of narrative disorder than as a movement toward resolution and clarification" (122). In *The Writer on Her Work*, Tyler's characters are labeled "boundary-doubters"; Tyler's reliance on *disorder* as a solution for excessive family order is often misunderstood. Often Tyler's characters fail miserably in their so-called "private" lives, only to communicate wonderfully in public, with "strangers." Tyler's endings, like Drabble's, are those of "continuing flux."

Bogus Trumper's life is a narrow, winding road, full of hazards, complications, and messiness: domestic demands, social demands, the desire for love and protection-- in short, involvement with the world. Although he tries sporadically to disengage from the chaos that his life has become, Bogus finally realizes that "massive involvement" is necessary. Or, as Miller puts it, "The overpowering pressure of external reality is central to Irving's fiction, and the sense of it traumatizes his protagonists, especially such sensitive ones as Trumper and Garp, who react to the world by trying to withdraw from it" (55). Irving's artistic/domestic philosophy, quoted above, shows that a comic attitude to the world demands some sort of connection to everyday life, to other people, and to love.

The writer/artist characters in these novels use writing as a way of connecting to the world. Or (and) they use their "selves-expression" as a way of making the possible live, breathe, and jump. The impetus for writing is impossible to pin down, but Irving's Garp gives one reason:

> "It's like trying to make the dead come alive," he said. "No, no, that's not right-- it's more like trying to keep everyone alive, forever ...." Finally, Garp said it in a way that seemed to please him. "A novelist is a doctor who sees only terminal cases," Garp said. (569-70)

Irving's fiction about fiction uses Garp to reveal the writer's role in society: writers are rejuvenators, warehousers of information, noticers, speakers-out. Garp's vision of writer-as-doctor is shown in his first story, "The Pension Grillparzer." Garp imagines a close family-- which he has never had-- and gives them an interesting job classifying hotels and restaurants for the Austrian Tourist Bureau. Like so much of the main novel, "Grillparzer" is pervaded with "lunacy and sorrow"; a shabby circus, a dancing bear, a man who walks on his hands, and a man who tells fortunes from dreams. Garp stops in the middle of writing the story, realizing that he needs vision: "... it would take only time to imagine a world of his own-- with a little help from the real world" (156).

(Writers write because they have vision, because they want to express that vision to other people. Sometimes the voice expressing the vision is damaged-- think of Owen Meany, or Garp, as a writer, noticing the damaged voices all around him. Irving has said the he is conscious of the difficulty of expressing oneself,

> how precarious our hold on symbols is. In Garp I created that recovery scene to push this idea to a kind of extreme: here we have the writer, who deals with language ... placed in a situation in which he can't make himself understood because the words he has at his disposal, on slips of paper, are ludicrously inadequate to communicate his feelings. This is a problem we all face but with writers the situation is magnified. (quoted in Harter and Thompson 151)

> **... I am saying that writerly writing is personal writing, whether or not it is autobiographical** (Torgovnick 27).

Other feminist writers, particularly bilingual French-Canadian, use the language question to communicate the problem of the inadequacy of words. Lola Lemire Tostevin writes that the "removal of the tongue," the mother-tongue, demands that the glosses be divided; in cases where only one side must go "the operation is modified/by splitting the tongue/ down the centre" and later in that collection, she writes of assuming a "grafted tongue"; allowing herself to "subjugate in order to conjugate." Something all of Irving's bearers of damaged voices can relate to.)

Garp has great sympathy for the "liars and criminals ... mystics and refugees and broken-down animals" (176) and a truly comic vision, partly because it is a strange mix of idealism and stoicism ("a doomed effort at reclassification"). Throughout his life, Garp's various visions of the world are expressed through his fiction; his next novel is carefully researched and meticulously written, less his later, more personal vision than unfelt, impersonal cardboard figures playing out a small drama. One reviewer calls it

> "... a complex and moving novel with sharp historic resonances .... the drama encompasses the longings and agonies of youth."
>
> "Oh fuck the 'longings and agonies of youth,'" Garp said. (197-8)

(The "longings and agonies of youth," I gleefully discovered, is quoted back from a Time review of Setting Free the Bears. Atwood, also, has incorporated reviews of her earlier work into Lady Oracle, especially those reviews that comment on her physical appearance: "[Linda Rogers] spent much of the article analyzing my cover photos, saying that I didn't smile in them" [Ingersoll 527]). And Garp's second novel, is an exaggerated account of partner swapping, as in The 158-Pound Marriage, and again Irving mocks reviews:

> One reviewer called the novel "bitterly truthful," but he hastened to point out that the bitterness doomed the novel to the status of "only a minor classic." (223)

It is also called "brilliant," "dumb," "sordid," "pathetic," and "confused." He writes a dull story, "Vigilance," that expresses his attitude to the world; he wants to keep his family completely closed off physically. Like "Grillparzer," it is written to get Helen's attention, but because of its pretentiousness and self-indulgence, it does exactly the opposite, and drives her away. He does not write again until after the gruesome accident in which Walt is killed; in keeping with the "tongues and penises" motif, the impostor writer Michael Milton loses his penis and Garp loses the ability to speak-- and to write. After a long and partially healing silence, Garp uses writing as therapy, pouring everything into The World According to Bensenhaver: accusation, justification, horror, paranoia.

Here Garp's vision of the world as "insane with grief" is made explicit and literal in the most violent way possible. Like Frank Berry, Garp now believes in random violence and fate as the guiding principles of the world, and wants to buy "a sort of isolation from the real and terrible world" to live "untouched by what he called 'the rest of life'" (442), like Sandy Stranger's attempt to find peace by renouncing an outside existence. But after Bensenhaver is finished, Helen has a baby, named after Jenny Fields, parallel events that show that "in the world according to Irving, art alone does not provide the means to live life fully" (Harter and Thompson 96). Garp, suddenly, blooms; he has plans for three more novels, all "truly imagined" and seemingly in the comic spirit of "Grillparzer," since he talks about their potential characters with tolerance and even affection. Instead of catharsis and violence, these novels seem poised to create worlds different-- and in all cases "better"-- than the one Garp lives in. The planned novels will posit other realities. The Plot Against the Giant, like "Grillparzer," seems to center on a hopeful but doomed effort at transformation; The Death of Vermont is a fairy tale; and My Father's Illusions is a great deal like the "almost transcendent" Hotel New Hampshire.

Garp is obviously "about" writers and writing, but my favorite Irving novel, The Water-Method Man, is focused on another, less formal but no less serious writer, Bogus Trumper, who is obsessed with churning out thesis pages.

(One of my friends has near-total writer's block. She has tried everything-- reward system, punishment system, sleep deprivation-- and is completely stressed out. She asked her supervisor for help. The supervisor looked at her, sighed, and said, "I certainly hope you're drinking."

U. of A. Student Counseling Centre's advice on writing a thesis: produce four pages a day, come hell or high water.

Gayatri Spivak's definition of success: five pages a day. Which reminds me of a joke: Q. What's the difference between God and Gayatri Spivak? A. God is everywhere. Gayatri Spivak is everywhere but Pittsburgh.)

Now I'm older than Bogus Trumper and still writing. Why do I write, why does Bogus write? Partly for the doctorate, notwithstanding Virginia's feelings on "badges, orders [and] degrees"; partly, like Bogus, to have it "finished." Says his thesis advisor:

> "Fred, I would suppose that this work is a kind of therapy for you?"
> "What work isn't?" Trumper said. (349)

There's so much pulling and twisting going on here. I want to say things clearly (like Offred, "I need to be very clear, in my own mind") but it's hard to separate out all the different strands and then braid them together. What I'm trying to decide: what do these authors envision as they're writing? Do they set out to try and prove something? If so, is it to prove that the present world is unsatisfactory in some way? That seems a safe enough assumption: all of these authors, in various places, have said that writers, while not necessarily didactic, should have a vision of some sort of world. Irving, in 1981, said he was most satisfied with Hotel New Hampshire because of his novels, it is "the most complete unto itself-- that is, it is the most of an entered and then left world. You enter it and you get out of it, and while you're in it, its rules apply, yours don't .... [Hotel New Hampshire] requires the least amount of understanding of the so-called real and outside world ..." (Miller 193). What Irving envisions is a fairy-tale world that bears some resemblance to our own, but this world is far more baroque and exaggerated. His world is informed by the very Rabelaisian "happy fatalism"-- or Woolfian parties in the middle of death.

Bogus Trumper, then. There is much writing of various kinds in The Water-Method Man: letters to bill collectors, Humbart's Vital Telegrams, letters from Dr. Trumper, portions of Akthelt and Gunnel. But, like The Handmaid's Tale, The Water-Method Man is also partly a diary and partly a retrospective, an attempt at seeing things in a fresh way. Bogus first decides to keep track of things (without putting them "in order") after reading a chapter of Humbart's Vital Telegrams, a contemporary novel where "structure is everything" (259) and which can be dipped in to at random. It contains such impenetrable sentences as "There was, of course, no logic to the dwarf's fear of Harold's rather large cat" (260). Bogus believes that the novel, like the movie Ralph is making of his life, means nothing, and then begins to speculate on Akthelt and Gunnel's plot. He is interrupted by Ralph coming into the bathroom (the only quiet place to read) to make a phone call. "Jesus, I should keep a diary, Trumper thought. That night he tried. After he had made love to Tulpen, questions were raised. Analogies leaped to his mind" (263-

4). His mind is crowded with images of Sprog, Fluvia, Akthelt, images from Helmbart's novel and Ralph's film, memories of Biggie and thoughts of Tulpen. "But he had to begin somewhere," and so he writes the first line of The Water-Method Man: "Her gynecologist recommended him to me" (265).

He begins to see analogies between the wretched prose of Akthelt and Gunnel, their stormy relationship, and his own life. When Akthelt goes off to fight the Greths, an argument ensues: does Axelruf stay at home or go off to war too? Like Biggie, Gunnel worries about her husband's infidelity; like Biggie, she is left with a son: "he did it Gunnel's way after all." As the sentimentalist he admits that he is, Trumper sees himself as beleagured by enemies, trying to remember that "the object of war is to survive it." He wants to give "his" characters, and himself, a happy ending: when he sees their "inevitable doom" he stops translating.

> Gunnel loved to look at Akthelt.
>   His knife was so long.
>
> But she knew in her heart
>   The world was too strong.
>
> Clearly Akthelt and Gunnel were headed for grief. I knew, and I simply didn't want to see it out. (32-3)

His chaotic life increasingly parallels their story: the marital infidelity, the separation to go "off to war," the best friend having an affair with the hero's wife; even Sprog has a similar, though much more severe, operation as Bogus': "He was de-balled with a battle ax" and exiled to the coast (272). Bogus has his urinary tract operation and goes into self-imposed exile in Iowa. But there are some major differences: unlike all of Irving's other early novels, there is no central violent incident in The Water-Method Man, although there are several bloody smaller scenes (the duck-hunting incident, which is mostly comic; the homosexual bashing, which we only hear about; a Biggie-Bogus argument that is briefly violent but equal, and Trumper's surreal and nightmarish abuse by Viennese police; nothing has the frightening quality of the shower door shattering in *The 158-Pound Marriage*, the extended violence in *Garp*, or the horror of Siggy being stung to death by bees in *Setting Free the Bears*). Except for his operation and his own clumsiness (which is considerable) Trumper is physically safe, with comedy instead coming from domestic and social conflicts.

His thesis characters, however, aren't as lucky; there is a drawn-out series of bloody events. Akthelt drives Gunnel crazy by constantly suspecting her of infidelity with the evil Hrothrund; determined to prove her innocence, she sexually entraps the villain, cuts off his head and stuffs it with live eels, but finds herself pregnant with Hrothrund's child, who is murdered by the insanely jealous Akthelt, who is in turn murdered by Gunnel, who is murdered by a lover, so Axelruf takes over the kingdom with his wife Gronigen .... you get the idea. The original writer of the epic "slyly implies that the story of Axelrulf and Gronigen is probably not much different from the story of Akethelt and Gunnel. So why not stop it there?" (354) As Bogus' thesis advisor observes, even sex is a blood sport in *Akthelt and Gunnel*, and the characters for whom he feels so much affection come to terrible ends. But Trumper is able to give himself, not a happy ending, but a happy beginning, at the novel's end. Like Joan Delacourt finally rejecting the "script" of passive romantic heroine, Bogus rejects the role of Akthelt *or* Sprog-- jealous lover OR exile-- and realizes that

"In good company we can be brave" (381).[27]

> In [Spark's] fiction, the self is always inadequate when it mistakes itself as source rather than agent. (Glavin 226)

Spark believes, not in the single, sole, essential individual, but in a process of transformation, of, at times, transfiguration. Teaching Brodie to first-years was instructive: they were worried by the novel's lack of closure (we'd just finished Pride and Prejudice, and all were quite satisfied with the progression of events there; as Miss Prism in The Importance of Being Earnest says, "The good end happily, and the bad unhappily. That is what Fiction means"). Spark's fiction "means" both more and less-- nothing really ends, and the good or bad ends of heroes and villains seem a moot point. Spark is a visionary and a revisionist. She takes the idea of being a subject-- as in "subject to certain conditions"-- and says, OK, this particular script may be laid down for us (including my characters), but let's (me and my readers) see what we can do to "re-see" it (most often from a comic perspective). Like other feminist writers, Spark revises and rewrites the old legends.

Her comic use of the subject is feminist in form and intent because she attacks the idea that uniformity and a closing-off of possibilities in text and in self is ideal. I like Glavin's use of the word "AGENT," as quoted above; it links up nicely (and neatly, for a change) with Paul Smith's description of the "human agent": "the place from which resistance to the ideological is produced or played out" (Preface), in the sense of a theatrical agent-- one who reads the scripts and makes decisions. The possibility of refusal, and the idea of resisting ideology is essential to Spark's writing. On a very bare-bones level this can mean Spark's upsetting refusal to provide us with what we've been led to expect. Ruth Whittaker observes:

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[27] This is not the heroic bravery of the typical romance story, the type of hero that leaves aside ordinary life. Instead Irving lampoons the ideology inherent in "that kind of bloodshed" (Miller 191). (In fact, he originally conceived of Akthelt and Gunnel as a separate book, a parody of heroic tales "from Tristan and Isolde to Siegfried to the Icelandic epics" [191]). In this way, he breaks up traditional narrative, much as Pym's or Atwood's anti-romances break up convention.

> Denied the expressions of shock, despair or authorial moralising that usually attend death in novels, the reader is forced to think instead of feel, to exercise a personal moral intelligence in each case, without explicit guidance from the author. This may be a useful discipline, but I am left, none the less, with a feeling of unease ... (13)

This comment is prompted by Spark's "coldness" in describing violent and unexpected death. In a very Rabelaisian way, death or violent scenes in Spark are often extremely funny; she sees death as only one of the four last things to be ever remembered (Death, Judgment, Hell and Heaven) with no special emphasis on the death of the physical body, since she sees the natural and the supernatural as the same. Spark's comic violence includes the mock-heroic duel with walking sticks in Memento Mori, Selina's savagery in rescuing a designer dress, or Miss Brodie's endless manipulation. But even more disturbing to some is Spark's matter-of-factness in dealing with violent death:

> Back and forth along the corridors ran Mary Macgregor, through the thickening smoke .... She ran into somebody on her third turn, stumbled and died. (JB 15)

> He wrenched the stick from the old woman's hand and, with the blunt end of it, battered her to death. It was her eighty-first year. (MM 156)

Spark denies us a vicarious identification with the damaged or dead characters; the apparent physical death is only a small event. The violence here has a childish fairy-tale quality (as does much of the violence in Irving's work): the lines "back and forth ran Mary Macgregor" and "It was her eighty-first year" could be almost chanted, or used as a jump-rope song. To emphasize the fairy-tale quality of such events is to arrest one's attention: look, this is "not real," but it is true; it can tell you something important. The "subject" is not necessarily subject to, or susceptible to, death itself-- what we would expect. A character's "being" often doesn't end in death; The Comforters, The Ballad of Peckham Rye and several of her short stories have at their heart supernatural[28], or non-physically existing characters: ghosts, devils, angels. Spark says of the latter: "... certainly I believe in angels" (quoted in Whittaker 1). And, a few years later "... violence and suffering are there, lurking everywhere, and of course death is inevitable-- I think life would be insipid without it" (Frankel interview 452).

> One is no longer allowed 'to feel the usual things in the usual places, about love, about death'." (Blau DuPlessis on Woolf's Chloe and Olivia, Writing Beyond the Ending 34)
>
> **[What emotions, if any, does one expect to feel in reading a thesis?]**

This refusal to fear death has a deep effect on her comedy. Events do not stop, as in tragedy with the death of the hero (imagine Lear or Hamlet going on past the ending). As in The World According to Garp, although a character dies, it is not the story's end-- just another progression or another transformation. And although Spark is sometimes classified as a "religious" writer, she is not one in the classical sense. Death is not a punishment for evil or heaven a reward for the good. This breaking of strict fictional rules gives her comedy great freedom. As I think of this, it seems that Irving's characters as well have little regard for death.

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[28] Time and space don't permit me to explore the use of science fiction or supernatural elements in feminist writing, but it's worth mentioning that Atwood describes Surfacing as "a ghost story," adding that "It's rather charming that people tend not to notice that." She discusses Life Before Man: "Everybody lives within that area [around the museum] and the only person who goes out is a dead person .... it doesn't have what some of my other novels have. And that is a supernatural dimension, or shall we say, another world or another area of the mind" (Lyons interview 77).

> "Death is horrible, final, and frequently premature," Coach Bob declared.
> "So what?" my father said.
> "Right!" cried Iowa Bob. "That's the point: so what?" (HNH 168)

> **Fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter.** (Bakhtin 47)

And laughter "presents an element of victory not only over supernatural awe, over the sacred, over death; it also means the defeat of power, of earthly kings, of the earthly upper classes, of all that oppresses and restricts" (Bakhtin 92).

Spark's death-defying laughter comes from other violations of the expected: another much-lamented trait is her lack of traditional character development, and in most cases a closely-related ambiguity in characters' attitudes. No stock comic character-- Mrs. Malaprop, Mr. Collins-- here; a great deal of Spark's comedy is uncomfortable, consisting of jokes played on the reader by the author. She leaves us hanging, frustrated and totally responsible for figuring out her vision-- and our own.

> Mary Macgregor likes to sit and listen to "stories and opinions which had nothing to do with the real word" (15); Sandy has to lead "a double life of her own" to keep herself from being bored.

Why does Sandy betray Miss Brodie? "Because" Miss Brodie encourages a pupil to fight in the Spanish war; the pupil is killed on the way there. Amateur psychologist that she is, Sandy decides Miss Brodie believes that she is Providence, the God of Calvin. And Sandy's newly born Calvinism ("she was more fuming with Christian morals, now, than

John Knox") won't let her stand for this behavior. So Sandy does the right thing: true to the principle of comic reversal, the pupil tells on the teacher.

But. There is much more going on here; Sandy "economically" betrays Miss Brodie by doing precisely what she is condemning Miss Brodie for: manipulation, displacement, each trying (as Judy Little observes) a "transfiguration of the commonplace" on each other. Parallels between Sandy and her teacher abound: both love plots, intrigue, "making patterns with facts," setting events in motion-- both have double (or multiple) lives that keep them intrigued. Sandy's betrayal is not as simple as it first appears. She has not "economically" achieved peace and righteousness. As a nun, she clutches "the bars of her grille more desperately than ever" (128) when interviewed about her strange psychological treatise, The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. This book, she says, is far more influenced by Miss Brodie "in her prime" than by anything "political, personal .... [or] Calvinism" (35). Miss Brodie, as much as Sandy, is a storyteller; both women make their own worlds. Neither woman has a stable, a secure, "identity." (The novel opens with definitions of what each girl is "famous" for-- sex, temper, gymnastics-- according to Miss Brodie. She has attempted to determine each girl's identity.)[29] As with Roberta Muldoon, Miss Brodie's body (and/or Sandy's perception of it) changes:

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[29] Belsey notes that "ideology interpellates concrete individuals as subjects, and bourgeois ideology in particular emphasizes the fixed identity of the individual," citing astrology as an example of such determinism; also listing pop psychology, pop sociology, and "human nature" (64). Calvinism, and other religions that stress predestination, also have a hand in devaluing process over progress.

> Some days it seemed to Sandy that Miss Brodie's chest was flat, no bulges at all, but straight as her back. On other days her chest was breast-shaped and large, very noticeable ... (11)

Before the betrayal, Sandy fumed with morals and made judgments; now she says of Miss Brodie, "Oh, she was quite an innocent in her way" (127).

> We are left uneasy. Mrs. Spark, having provoked our righteous indignation at Miss Brodie's behavior, proceeds to unsettle a little our moral composure. (Whittaker 109)

In Brodie, we're forced to suspend judgment, and thoroughly "messed up." We can either be irritated or laugh at this ambiguity, as I think (I hope) Spark intends us to. Sandy has doubled, multiplied feelings about Miss Brodie too:

> ... Miss Brodie was making her new love story fit the old. Thereafter the two girls listened with double ears, and the rest of the class with single.
>
> Sandy ... was divided between her admiration for the technique and the pressing need to prove Miss Brodie guilty of misconduct. (72)

This ambiguity is not tidily resolved at novel's end; Sandy remains divided and in conflict, in a state of paradox. She comes to realize that betraying Miss Brodie may (or may not) have been the right or best thing to do. This is well foreshadowed:

> "Sandy, I'll swear you are short-sighted, the way you peer at people. You must get spectacles."
> "I'm not," said Sandy irritably, "it only seems so." (107)

In Spark's world, some vision seems correct or true, but it ain't necessarily so. Perfect vision is not possible; as Sandy, at seventeen, admits: "... she wondered to what extent it was Miss Brodie who had developed complications throughout the years, and to what extent it was her own conception of Miss Brodie that had changed" (119-20). In keeping with Sparkian paradox, Sandy is simultaneously wise (as such insights reveal) and a fool but we are not to judge her unless we also judge ourselves.

> What is so terrible about fools? I should be honoured to be of that company. (Laurence, Jest 205)

Spark is also preoccupied with the arbitrariness of time. In her novels, time is not linear, is not chopped up into neat chunks (Brodie alone has fourteen flash-backs and flash-forwards). Instead, as is shown in her use of figures who are "outside" time-- ghosts, angels, devils, comedians-- chronology is something we have invented for ourselves. Her characters exist simultaneously in various times and multiple places. Sandy is simultaneously a schoolgirl marching with her classmates through the streets of Edinburgh and a married lady having an argument with her husband; Mary Macgregor runs hither and thither from the fire in the chemistry lab and the fire that kills her.

> I play around a great deal with time, for instance; in some of my books I do away with time altogether. What interests me about time is that I don't think chronology is causality: I don't think that the cause of things necessarily comes hours, moments, years before the event; it could come after, without the person knowing .... This is not realism, you know. (Frankel interview 451)

> Nonsense writers also experiment with the boundaries of meaning, exaggerating or shrinking what is perceived by common sense, or playing with words and concepts to reveal alternative possibilities. They play with infinity and time, changing temporal order and logical causality. In nonsense anything can happen in any order. They experiment with simultaneity, putting incongruous things next to one another .... They continually arrange and rearrange, upsetting logical sequence and creating arbitrary new orderings. (Stow 98)

Spark's play with time is mischievous, comic, and feminist. Why feminist? For one: if time doesn't matter, age doesn't matter. And she is moving completely away from ideas of order, progress, hierarchy; of actions later having foreseeable consequences; away from the linear progression of time (making "time lines" in school) and toward a circular, swirling motion, "marvelous moments all seen at one time," an overlay or relief map of a situation where all events are valued equally. To pull time away from its place as a grounding is to leave you uncertain, suspended in mid-air. Atwood comically considers the question of time in her epigraph to Cat's Eye: "Why do we remember the past, and not the future?" (Hawking's A Brief History of Time). And in a sort of preamble to the novel, Elaine sets the scene for thoughts about time; it is not a line but a dimension. Elaine then thinks of time

> as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. (3)

(Unbidden, a picture came into my mind: Gatsby reaching toward the green light and that phrase "borne back ceaselessly into the past"-- and in Hotel New Hampshire, a novel which borrows freely from The Great Gatsby and from Freud, John's advice to Frank on his fortieth birthday: to close softly doors to rooms he could not re-enter. Frank's reply: "Close your own doors! You'll be forty soon enough. As for me, I bang the damn doors and come back to them all the fucking time!" [399]) To make time material, "something you could see," is more or less heresy. This attitude is also Spark's credo. In a 1961 interview, she made an extraordinary comment:

> even if a particular character has struck my imagination, one person I've met, I never reproduce the character in the book. It's ... also a kind of memory that I can't explain, almost as if I remember the past before I was born .... I seem to have a memory for people I've never met, or a knowledge of people I've never met ... (Whittaker 26 quoting Muggeridge TV interview)

-- much like Adrienne Rich's "remembering forward into our pasts"? Events, such as they are, can happen simultaneously or out of the usual order. Little's reliance on the term "liminal" is very useful: the idea of being neither one nor the other, between solid "core" identities and in a state of flux, of instability. Time seems to be the one constant in life; when it is mocked, disregarded or played on, readers can become deeply upset. Spark uses time without giving in to it. Spark claims there is "no distinction between the experience gained from books and other kinds of experience"; further, she sees "no line separating the supernatural from the natural .... Instead, she insists, they are 'implicit in each other'" (Glavin 223, from an interview with Spark).

Further, Spark "gives the impression of using rather than submitting to doctrines, of plundering for her own purposes" (Whittaker 1). This holds for her use (and abuse, some would say), of other texts, the "taking liberties" with Job's story, with Robinson Crusoe's, with Nixon's. This is intimately connected to radical ideas of the subject: its opposite, liberal notions of the self, center on progression, learning, adjustment. All these are linear, with an end goal in mind. Paul Smith writes (admittedly in a slightly different context, but only slightly) of

> those forms of psychologism which have as their general goal the adjustment of a coherent, whole, and self-valuing ego into a society which ... relies upon its cohesion for its own proper functioning. (136)

To carry this further, or to spin off on this idea-- that society demands a stable "individual"-- liberal ideas of the self are, as Silverman notes, synonymous with consciousness (127). "I" is used as if it unproblematically and accurately reflects the identity of the speaker. To take on the first part of this equation, Spark, Atwood, Pym and, to a lesser degree, Irving challenge the idea of the self as "subject to reason," logic, consciousness:

> Initially (and continuously) constructed in discourse, the subject finds in the discourse of the classic realist text a confirmation of the position of autonomous subjectivity represented in ideology as 'obvious.' It is possible to refuse that position, but to do so ... is to make a deliberate and ideological choice. (Belsey 80)

Spark's characters, most obviously Sandy, contradict this Cartesian idea of independence and private consciousness. Sandy is "divided against herself"; further, she attempts to achieve transcendence not in spite of materiality but because of it. Like Nicholas (The Girls of Slender Means), she rejects Calvinism and its dismissal of the material. Her succession, or co-existence, of different selves is not linear or hierarchical, but a procession. Her various selves are contradictory and unfinished-- transitory, given "the kind of radical freeplay that allows comedy to live up to the very best of its bad reputation" (Little 21). So Spark's ideas of identity, or of self, are playful and flexible. When speaking of religion, she says, " ... in the modern world nobody has any fixed belief or fixed idea of anything ... " (Frankel interview 445). Sandy's motives, similarly, are not fixed values or ideas; they fluctuate, and she is torn between admiring Miss Brodie and destroying her. The multiple selves presented, or buried within Brodie, are Spark's ways of resisting the authority of the author. Like Atwood, she wants us to take some responsibility for peeling back the layers of meaning. Here a comic attitude to "identity" as a single unified whole questions and undermines the satisfactoriness of a world that emphasizes the concentrated and the singular.

(Men always seem to have "great powers of concentration" and "self-possession" and they are self-contained, while women are "scatter-brained," "all over the place.")

(This reminds me of a moment in class, hearing Anatomy of Criticism being labeled as "SEMINAL." How would you describe, say, Sexual Politics? "Ovarian"? "Fallopian"? "Mammarian"? [which in turn reminds

me of a high school joke:]
Q. What's long and hard and full of semen?
A. A submarine.

Also, a classic case of reversal comedy-- a black man told me this:
Q. What's white and twelve inches long?
A. Nothing.

A further note: last night [July 2, 1990] CBC described The Second Sex as "seminal" and proceeded to rip apart de Beauvoir based on her relationship with Sartre: her biographer minutely described de Beauvoir drinking rotgut and crying in Paris cafés; the conversation then turned to whether reviewers would like de Beauvoir for a friend, if her life was more interesting than her theoretical and feminist writing [they decided it was] and why she rejected the label "lesbian." Not one word besides "seminal" was mentioned in conjunction with The Second Sex.)

Spark's vision ultimately is of contradiction, paradox, ambiguity. This seems to run counter to her religious belief, but, as I've said, her religion is odd, comic, "something to depart from." In fact, Spark wrote an introduction for Cardinal Newman's sermons, which stress the "paradoxes of the Beatitudes" (Little 104). For example, Christ says, "many that are first shall be last, and the last shall be first" [Matthew 5]- a revolutionary statement of comic reversal if ever I heard one. (Peter Lougheed: "The meek shall inherit the earth, but not its natural resources.") Inversion, or turning upside down, is implied here and resounds throughout much feminist comedy.

> Viewed from a certain perspective, a quite sensible and upright world will be seen as inverted, grotesque, flawed, and comic, even its basic moral arrangements all awry. (Little 105)

Spark, I think, makes us question the "single, solitary self" so common in the traditional novel. She goes a step beyond the "journey of the hero" archetype, with its linear and progressive stages, to something more questioning (an "interrogative" text?).[30]

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[30] Belsey's Critical Practice (1980) includes a lengthy section on "The Interrogative Text." She notes that unity and consistency were not obvious to Renaissance readers; that the subject was continuously in

process of construction. Significantly, she notes that Elizabethan theatre was in process ("in the round") and that performances were considerably less controlled with their direct addresses to the audience (95). The Laurence Olivier film version of *Henry V*, for example, employs this strategy, incorporating audience reaction into the performance. Bakhtin labels these techniques "dialogic/polyphonic," where a text's voices are multiple and equal, refusing singularity (in contrast to the "monologic/homophonic" technique, where all voices conform to one author's world-view). Significantly, Belsey suggests that Dostoevsky's texts refuse a single point of view and, while it's impossible to judge the influence of one writer upon another, Woolf's reading of Dostoevsky is well known:

> Form, then, is the sense that one thing follows another rightly. This is partly logic. T[urgenev] wrote and re-wrote. To clear the truth of the unessential. But Dostoievsky [*sic*] would say that everything matters. (Woolf's *Writer's Diary* 204)

Multiplicity is essential to Woolf's work and to the work of other feminist writers. Melba Cuddy-Keane closely examines *Between the Acts* as a "new model of society .... advocating a decentering of authority; instead of proposing dissolution as a metaphor of loss, the narrative may be suggesting that fragmentation permits a new and fluid sense of community" (274). She mentions the possible influence of Jane Harrison's *Ancient Art and Ritual*, which distinguishes between leader-centered and community art:

> The center of this performance is the "hearth," not "the leader's tent or ship"; the circumference is the whole community: "There is no division at first between actors and spectators; all are doing the thing done, dancing the dance danced." (126; quoted in Cuddy-Keane 274)

Bakhtin's description of the carnival as the "lived in, not looked at" is important here, as is the turnabout logic of carnival, which is communal and universal. The upside down logic of carnival demands (a temporary) instance of "woman on top," use of the vernacular instead of formal language, and a celebration of confusion: "If ... [chaos]-- or the unity of undifferentiated sexuality-- is the progenitor of all life, then the separate sexes represent a falling off from that original fecundity" (Ackroyd 37). Ackroyd, and other writers on cross-dressing, see transvestism as "an insult to the economic, moral nature of the male" (64) and a generalized defiance of hierarchy.

Grotesque imagery, as I've noted, links together plant, animal, and human and treats this combination *playfully*. Such "lived in" art invites the spectator to become an equal participant.

> The narrative act of transforming all voices into chorus is unavoidably political; it subverts the habitual dominance of the leader figure and introduces a new concept of community in which the insider-outsider dichotomy is erased and the bond of common identity is rewritten as a unifying participation in common

Atwood, too, denies this "linear journey," especially in her later work. Similarly, too, she denies us the traditional satisfaction of closure. Like Spark, Atwood believes in "making a world" through fiction in order to posit the possible:

> ... what kind of world shall you describe for your reader? The one you can see around you, or the better one you can imagine? If only the latter, you'll be unrealistic; if only the former, despairing. But it is by the better world we can imagine that we judge the world we have. ("Witches" in Second Words)

I'd like here to think about the question of the self or the subject in Atwood's work. In The Edible Woman and Bodily Harm, Atwood questions the ideologies with which we're indoctrinated, through her parodic exposés of marketing and packaging. In Lady Oracle, Joan Delacourt resists such packaging as a "female Leonard Cohen" (227) and, as an "escape artist," assumes various alternative, transitory identities. On a surface-y, trendy level, comedy arises from her efforts to keep her fat unloved past self hidden from admirers of her current status as literary phenomenon, her "adulterous self" away from her stuffy husband,

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action. (Cuddy-Keane 275)

Cuddy-Keane labels this "destabilizing comedy," but "revolutionary" is possibly more accurate; "by blocking the establishment of any norm, [this comedy] offers a vision of society that accommodates fragmentation, paradox, ambiguity, and contradiction" (280). Little's term for this is "unruliness," and notes Woolf's and Spark's lack of closure, where endless possibility is assured by absolute openness (187). Similarly, Brothers notes Pym's "infinite possibilities for change" (74).

A rough description of deconstruction would note its employment of the reader-critic as a finder of multiple meanings, contradictions, and omissions (an incomplete body, a body in process) as opposed to the traditional practice of searching for unity and coherence (the clean, finished body), where "[h]aving created a canon of acceptable texts, criticism then provides them with acceptable interpretations, thus effectively censoring any elements in them which come into collision with dominant ideology" (Belsey 109). Hence, various critical readings of Pym's novels, for example, as "miniatures," or as focussing on "the shock of disappointment and rejection" (Cotsell 3), rather than sneakily subversive un-marriage novels.

and her "dead" self from discovery from various authorities. This is on the level of "comic romp," as Richler termed it, or as a sort of Marx Brothers comedy: lots of sneaking in and out of doors, hiding, dumb jokes:

("SSSSH! My brother's got insomnia and he's tryin' to sleep it off."

> "I'd like to marry you." "But I'm already married-- that would be bigamy." "Well, it's big of me too."
>
> "Come closer, darling-- closer ...." [heavy breathing]
> "If I get any closer I'll be behind you.")

In Lady Oracle, with this level there is another:

> This was the beginning of my double life. But hadn't my life always been double? There was always that shadowy twin, thin when I was fat, fat when I was thin, myself in silvery negative .... But not twin even, for I was more than double, I was triple, multiple, and now I could see that there was more than one life to come, there were many. (247)

Lady Oracle comments on, parodies, skewers Canadian nationalism, left-wing politics, "the world of books," Girl Guides, Gothics, Harlequin romances and religions of various kinds: this novel is so much fun I'd like to tackle all these things (all institutions of larger and smaller kinds), but for now I should stick to the topic (I'm careful not to say "subject") at hand: the self, the subject, and how comedy can free a multiplicity of selves.[31] What I mean is that a comic vision of "the self" splits it into a great many coexisting selves.

Early in her marriage, Joan likens herself to "a kid's chemistry set" (18) - when mixed up, something exciting might happen. Her incendiary nature and Joan's awareness of multiplicity begins early in her life. Even her name is at issue. Her mother names her after Joan Crawford, something that has always puzzled her: "Did she give me someone else's name because she wanted me never to have a name of my own?" (38) Her mother's attempts to transform Joan into a graceful, ideal daughter backfire with ballet lessons. Joan's idealized vision of herself vanished when she must wear a mothball suit instead of a gauzy, dreamy ballet costume ("I was hoping for magic transformations, even then" [43]).[32]

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[31] Bakhtin examines the theme of the masquerade as part of carnivalesque imagery. It is "connected with the joy of change and reincarnation, with gay relativity and with merry negation of uniformity and similarity; it rejects conformity to oneself (39-40).

(While reading this section, I burst out to D., "They tried to get me to take ballet."
"What happened?"
"I wouldn't get out of the car.")

The "self" that longs for magic transformations is still there, and is expressed outwardly through an appearance that changes[33]-- and later through Joan's various kinds of writing.

Joan's relationship with her mother is one of the keys to the novel. Seeing her mother at her dressing table with the triple mirrors, painting on her "double mouth", shows her the possibility of multiple natures. In a dream she often has, she realizes that "instead of three reflections [her mother] had three multiple heads, which rose from her toweled shoulders on three separate necks. This didn't frighten me, as it seemed a confirmation of something I'd always known" (64). She does become frightened, though, when she realizes a man will open the door and find out the truth about her mother: "something terrible would happen, not to my mother but to me" (64). Joan says that her mother was "a monster," but begins to soften after her mother's astral body comes for a visit. Her mother cries silently and horribly, and Joan worries that she will never be rid of her; in one way, this is true, because her mother's dissatisfaction sometimes comes out in Joan, as if her mother, too, tries and fails to live up to the romantic ideal. Later when she uses the automatic writing experiment for the poems that later become Lady Oracle, she finds the "darkgold lady, the redgold lady ... she is one and three." As Sherrill Grace notes, this multiple lady also shows up at the center of the maze in the "Gothic gone wrong," Stalked by Love. Two of the women look like Joan herself, with red hair; one resembles Lou Delacourt (Joan's Costume Gothics alter ego's name, a tribute to her beloved aunt) and one is the Fat Lady. All of these are aspects of Joan herself. I think that this "spreading" of selves is a revelation to Joan; she is multiple and there are things about herself that she may not know on a conscious level. She realizes, but is ashamed of, the excess of her early life: "Arthur's tastes were Spartan, and my early life and innermost self would have appalled him. It would be like asking for a steak and getting a slaughtered cow" (217).

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[32] The way that the subject is constructed is, as Toril Moi contends, contaminated by patriarchy; ideal images have their sources in culture. Even as a child Joan sees the female ideal portrayed on the screen: sweet and suffering June Allyson, Judy Garland coping with an alcoholic husband, Moira Shearer torn between her career and love.

[33] Changing bodies, especially in Atwood's work, seem to reflect changing selves:

> "... women are much more conscious of the fact of the possibility of bodily transformation. Of course when you're pregnant you're quite a different shape, and when you go from being a child to being a woman your shape changes much more radically than a boy's does .... You really change from one kind of thing to something that is radically different." (Lyons interview 76)

Like many of Pym's women, Joan is propagandized with romance ("women victimized by fiction")-- scripts that lead her to expect certain things of herself and of other people. Blau DuPlessis calls the Gothic "a major organizing grid for female consciousness .... a form of sexual feudalism" (Writing Beyond the Ending 44). Joan is a believer in and producer of Gothics, at least until the novel's end. Idealized female images are packaged as "quick fixes" in Harlequin-style romances, or in the Italian fotoromanzi. Joan begins to produce these stylized romances herself, at first for money, and then because she becomes adept at learning the rules. Sympathy for the dark-haired villainess is not permitted: "If she'd only been a mistress instead of a wife, her life could have been spared; as it was, she had to die. In my books all wives were eventually either mad or dead, or both" (321). But Joan begins to question the ideology behind this: what has Felicia done to deserve death? why should she be sacrificed for the sake of Charlotte, who is tiresomely pure? Joan's novel won't "contain itself" ; it spreads like crabgrass, violating the boundaries and the rules strictly set out for Costume Gothics: Felicia becomes the Fat Lady, and says to Lord Redmond, "... it was such an effort, Arthur, to get out of that water and come all this way, just to be with you again ..." (324). As with Bogus' thesis, fictional events mirror their authors' life-- or the authors' life mirrors fiction. Neither will obey a strict plot-- both are full of "protuberances and offshoots," events and people out of control. To an extent both Bogus and Joan try to impose the sequence of fiction upon events in their own lives. Sherrill Grace writes:

> It may be true, as Northrop Frye argues, that all literature comes from other literature-- Lady Oracle parodies the very idea-- but life does not, or should not, especially if the literature is Gothic romance. (118)

Joan begins to question the romantic script she has tried so hard to live up to in writing and in life: irritated at her characters' inability to be happy enough, she begins to wonder when her life will be her own, when these annoyingly one-dimensional people will go away and leave her alone. When she sends Charlotte into the maze, she is descending into her own mind; but unlike Surfacing's nameless narrator, who goes into the heart of darkness in a solemn, Joseph Conrad way, Joan does her ruthless self-examination in typically comic style. She goes into "the maze" and sees her different selves: she's told that sometimes they coexist, sometimes they appear one at a time, sometimes Arthur/Lord Redmond doesn't know them. Like all Gothic heroines, she is hunted down by the "killer in disguise," a figure as changeable as she, who tries to lure her into his reach:

> Cunningly, he began his transformations .... His face grew a white gauze mask, then a pair of mauve-tinted spectacles, then a red beard and moustache, which faded, giving place to burning eyes and icicle teeth. Then his cloak vanished and he stood looking at her sadly; he was wearing a turtle-neck sweater .... (343)

These are all the men that have seemed to offer her mystery, romance, intrigue, or rescue: her father, Paul, The Royal Porcupine, the villain in her poetry, and Arthur. The transforming man turns back into Lord Redmond and offers to rescue her. She refuses. Without getting too serious and spoiling a delicious comic moment, it's nonetheless important to notice that this is one of the few times Joan refuses romance: she has upset the script, broken the sequence-- a liminal event, since to depart from the script means that one necessarily has to improvise (as I know too well), and I think that Joan's tentative decision to begin to write science fiction is a signal of this willingness to improvise. That's not to say that Joan will storm the barricades of Harlequin Romance headquarters, but it is, nonetheless, an ending that is also a beginning: "The wisdom of the oracle is simple enough-- to thine own selves be true" (Grace 128). Atwood gives us an untidy, ever-changing hero in Joan Delacourt.

Questioning the Scripts: Pym's women

> ... most Pym protagonists perceive marriage to be limiting. The foremost horror, Belinda Bede remarks, would be a union which erodes a woman's individuality. Marriage, she has noticed, makes husbands and wives "grow to be like each other" .... Belinda suggests recurring social and psychological attitudes closely allied to an ancient Yiddish folk-saying: "when a husband and wife sleep on one pillow, finally they have one head." (Graham 147)

Jane Austen remarks that to choose a husband is to choose a life. So the question: what if one chooses NOT to have a husband?

There is the pervasive idea that marriage completes, finishes, rounds off a person-- like traditional ideas of identity, it relies on the susceptibility of human beings to peer pressure, the status quo-- other labels for "dominant ideology." Critics of Pym are split down the middle: does she indeed celebrate the state of "singleness" (a tricky term, since I'll be talking about "single" people with "multiple selves"-- maybe "unmarried" is better? "Single" is a strange word anyway, suggesting "single, solitary" or the smallest burger at Wendy's or the lowliest base hit. And "couple"-- well, I remember my mother asking me, at about age five, to get her "a couple" of table napkins. I asked her how many that meant. "Oh, two or three," she said. Consequently I've had trouble, especially with being called half of "a married couple"). Joan Delacourt recognizes this part of marriage as she writes her Costume Gothics. The multiple Lady Redmond says:

> "... every man has more than one wife. Sometimes all at once, sometimes one at a time, sometimes ones he doesn't even know about." (342)

But it's true that marriage seems to solidify these selves, or to consolidate the flexibility or mutability of "the subject"-- perhaps because married people are "subject to" certain unchanging expectations (name change, children if "normal," a hierarchy within the family, etc.). The legal system props up the "corporate identity" that married people have, and most of Althusser's ISAs strongly support "the two shall become one" idea. It is almost impossible to visualize other options or other possibilities. Like academia, which sometimes revels in narrow specialization, the construct of relationships admits a closed-down, closed-off choice. So back to my original question: is Pym celebrating another choice by repudiating the dominant one-- or is she lamenting (with a patina of humor) the Outsider status of her characters, by showing their "shock of disappointment and rejection" (Cotsell 3)?

Mildred consistently mocks other people's condescension or pity towards her single state: "I suppose an unmarried woman just over thirty, who lives alone and has no apparent ties, must expect to find herself involved or interested in other people's business, and if she is also a clergyman's daughter then one might really say that there is no hope for her" (7). Repeatedly Mildred, and other Pym characters like her, attempt to reassure others that being single is not necessarily tragic and might be preferable to marriage, that a full life is possible without a husband and children. Her declaration early in the novel, that she is "not at all like Jane Eyre" (9) signals her determination to shun idealized visions of romance. Barbara Brothers notes that Pym often subverts literary clichés (Jane Eyre, spring evenings by the fire, literary quotations, exalted and heroic actions)-- this is another way of breaking the code, or "writing beyond the ending," as Blau DuPlessis would say. To refuse the romantic paradigm, as Joan Delacourt does, is subversive.

Imagine a whole novel about an unmarried woman who is not "hunting down" a man! And what's more, she's perfectly happy with her life!

> [Nin's] diary as form and process is a stratagem to solve a contradiction often present in acute form for women: between the desire to please, making woman an object, and the desire to reveal, making her a subject. (Blau DuPlessis 266)

Pym, more or less consciously, posed her own work as "minor," but, as Michael Cotsell observes, "the reader misses a great deal if he or she takes that pose at face value (like a male failing to perceive the significance of a woman's understated remarks in a conversation)" (33). It's hard to be sure whether Pym intended this pose out of lack of self-confidence (especially after Cape devastated her by turning down her seventh novel), a kind of reverse defiance, or as a very Pymian irony: the world looks on the lives of excellent women as minor, she'd say, but I don't; I'll quietly and subversively publish their lives-- make this group of supposedly dull old maids alive-- then we'll see how minor they really are.

There is that irony in Pym's life-- of the two needs-- to "reveal" the lives of her excellent women, and to "please" her public, her publishers. Bringing up, of course, the whole question of writing-- especially comic writing-- being a public performance, under the eyes of someone else. And this irony comes across in Pym's characters, too-- the desire to please set against the desire to reveal.

> "Is that another Ministry across there?" I asked.
>
> "Ah, yes, the Ministry of Desire," said William solemnly.
>
> I protested, laughing.
>
> "They always look so far away, so not-of-this world, those wonderful people," he explained.
>
> "But perhaps we seem like that to them. They may call _us_ the Ministry of Desire." (_ExW_ 70)

Mildred, throughout most of the novel, refuses the temptation to be determined solely by her "single" status. Graham observes:

> In this role [that of "excellent women"] the voice of reason counteracts traditional assumptions and the self-centered expectations of others. Belinda, Mildred, Catherine, Leonora work out for themselves the truths of spinsterhood as learned through observation and experience. (158)

The "lived in" experience of Mildred and her fictional sisters is diametrically opposed to the "looked at," prescriptive behavior of those who believe a satisfying life must include marriage and children, or at the very least romance of the type Joan Delacourt imagines. Pym, however, stubbornly clings to telling the stories about her truly excellent women.

> What interests Pym are battles we have with ourselves, with job, church, obtuse relatives and crotchety salespeople, struggles that result in small victories, tiny defeats, and the successive accommodations that comprise daily life. Instead of depicting ponderous pseudo-events, she locates the inane and ludicrous in the commonplace, in the everyday detritus that fills up the spaces between our public acts. (Graham 154)

By questioning the social order that shuffles excellent women to the lowest status, Pym turns around traditional structures of love and romance.

Pym's women, like _Lady Oracle_ and _The Water-Method Man_, comically put forward the question of multiple and contradictory selves, and both Atwood and Irving use similar comic techniques in questioning the value we place on "adjustment," or "growing up" (a code word for accepting the world the way it is). Irving's vision is ultimately more conservative in other novels than in this one; Irving says of _The Water-Method Man_, "I wanted to write a book that was absolutely comic" (Marcus 72); Eleanor Wynard notes Irving's "generous perspective of the comic vision" (284). Although here both Irving and Wynard are thinking in terms of traditional comedy, it seems more accurate to think of The Water-Method Man as revolutionary: the hero does not return to reaffirm society's mores (he is unemployed, uneasily divorced, and he still wonders "what he could have thought he wanted" [381])-- far from being a returning hero full of newly learned skill and courage, both Bogus and Joan remark on life's messiness at novel's end: Bogus realizes "the often lonely business of living with someone" (378) and Joan breezily says, "I don't think I'll ever be a very tidy person" (345). Here "growing up," having goals (which only makes Joan think of hockey) is a never-ending process. (In Hotel New Hampshire, of course, Irving examines the question of childlike parents and children who are old beyond their years with Win Berry and his daughter Franny.)

Process, in the sense of something ongoing, reincarnation, is a key idea in Rabelaisian comedy as set down by Bakhtin, a joy in the process of change and rejection of conformity. The playful aspect of life, the part that revels in confusion, mockery, violation of boundaries-- is part of the comic tradition. This aspect spreads beyond boundaries and transgresses rules.

> [Lord Redmond had] become tired of the extravagance of Felicia: of her figure that spread like crabgrass, her hair that spread like fire, her mind that spread like cancer or pubic lice. "Contain yourself," he'd said to her ... (320)

As discussed earlier, this Rabelaisian comic principle is related to that of dismemberment, disassembly. Joan addresses herself: "Pull yourself together," when what she really wants to do is to pull her selves together and make her life "neat and simple, understated, even a little severe" (3). All around her things are dismembered; the Royal Porcupine likes to blow things up and smash things as "art". As a child she sees "The Red Shoes" and longs to dance gracefully, adored by men in evening dress. While hiding out in Italy, she finally gets to waltz by herself--

> Wings grew from my shoulders, an arm slid around my waist .... Shit. I'd danced right through the broken glass, in my bare feet. Some butterfly .... The real red shoes, the feet punished for dancing. (335-6)

This comic "dismemberment" is Bakhtin's "body in process" always of becoming something else. Joan's body manifests, on the outside, the physical, some of her coexisting selves.

> (D. is defrosting the fridge. I feel slightly guilty.
>
> Kyla began again to tell us of her wonderful marriage, their agreements, their arrangements ...
> "Their filthy refrigerators," Mira put in.
> "Oh, Mira!" Kyla said with testy affection. "Why do you always have to bring us down to the level of the mundane, the ordinary, the stinking, fucking refrigerator? I was talking about ideals, nobility, principles ..." [French 309, ellipses in orig.)
> Graduate students then suggest titles for papers on refrigerators: "The Image of the Refrigerator in the Twentieth-Century Novel," "The Frost-Free Syndrome in 'Fire and Ice.'"

D. just added one: "The White Box and the Black Box: Defrosting the State." Strangely enough (or maybe not strangely if you're thinking about comic principles), Joan Delacourt, a former glutton, also has thoughts on this appliance:

> There was something to be said for refrigerators. Although they inspired waste, they created the illusion that there would always be a tomorrow, you could keep things in them forever .... Why had the media analysts never done any work on refrigerators? Those who had refrigerators surely perceived life differently from those who didn't .... As these thoughts dribbled through my head I began to feel that my whole life was a tangent (313).

Tangent: diverging from an original purpose or course, IRRELEVANT. I also like "tangential"'s definition: "touching lightly." Now that I've touched lightly on refrigerators ....) But I'm quite sure that Pym had something to say about refrigerators; if I find anything, I'll certainly add it in (you may think I have an unnatural attachment to household appliances; well, I once won $200 for a poem about a washing machine, so it's understandable. But don't get me started on labor-saving devices.)

Bogus' dismemberment is partly physical too. His urinary tract is a "narrow, winding road" (12), full of complications that make peeing, sex, and other aspects of everyday life uncomfortable or impossible.

Bogus' attempts to fix the problem without pain prompt several things: first, and early in the novel, is a declaration of subject so blunt as to take your breath away: "Her gynecologist recommended him to me. Ironic: the best urologist in New York is French" (11). Throughout the novel the "language of the marketplace" is used to discuss scatological problems and matters of the body of all kinds-- a "lowering of the abstract to the earth." (Comic writers' use of "obscene" language is a topic well worth exploring.) But it is the appearance of a physician so early in the novel that intrigues me-- Dr. Vigneron is the first in a long line of Irving medical people-- Jenny Fields, Jenny Garp, Wilbur Larch and all the medical paraphernalia in The Cider House Rules. Given that in The World According to Garp a novelist is "a doctor who sees only terminal cases," Dr. Vigneron's inclusion in a comic novel signals an essential connection between the two professions.[34]

These two elements are synthesized in The Water-Method Man. Bogus describes

> the shocking birth of his first child (he was treated at the State University of Iowa hospital in March of 1965 for a fainting spell, following the first look at his gory, swaddled son. "It's a boy!" the nurse, fresh and dripping from the delivery room, informed him. "Will it live?" asked Trumper, sliding gelatinous to the floor). (71)

Physicians have a special relationship to the physical, material side of life. This can provide a link to feminism and its emphasis on remembering the body, writing through the body; Wittig's The Lesbian Body, for instance, at times reads like a medical treatise. Doctors of medicine also see the incomplete, unfinished, diseased and regenerated body; I think this is why they are so often comic characters (an early and very awful thesis proposal draft of mine mentioned doctors, prisoners and housewives as "confined beings," who use humor either as an escape or as a means of revolution. I have seen studies that traced jokes to their origins; a surprising number were made up by surgeons, prisoners, and people in the armed services).

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[34] In Rabelaisian comedy, the physician is linked with life's liminal events: s/he brings life and death. Garry Trudeau, the creator of Doonesbury, recently shocked some members of his audience when one character, a doctor who treated primarily AIDS patients, wisecracked with them about the disease.

Bakhtin writes that doctors are

> not concerned with a completed and closed body but with the one that is born, which is in the stage of becoming. The body that interests him is pregnant, delivers, defecates, is sick, dying, and dismembered. (179)

(The close link between life and death can be easily illustrated: specialists in lung cancer and emphysema teach their patients breathing techniques derived from childbirth breathing exercises. My father, undergoing treatment for lung cancer, takes the same vitamins as my pregnant older sister.)

(One of my relatives, a doctor, describes the atmosphere during surgery: the surgeons, nurses, anaesthetists tell the most vile, disgusting jokes they know. My mother says that when she was in labor for me, all she could overhear were stories of the wild party the delivery team had gone to the night before. My sister, my aunt, and my best friend are all nurses: one in a home for the elderly, one in an emergency room, one in a maternity ward. At any family gathering they inevitably meet and tell "nurse jokes." Their attitude to life is somehow different: as if everything matters, and nothing matters, comic in an indescribable way.)

Bakhtin describes medicine as a "farce with three characters"-- the patient, the doctor and the disease (again, disease can be liminal simply because it is "out of bounds," not subject to control). Gilda Radner, who died recently of ovarian cancer, published a comic poem in the _AMA Journal_:

> Doctors are whippersnappers in ironed white coats
> Who spy up your rectums and look down your throats
> And press you and poke you with sterilized tools
> And stab at solutions that pacify fools.
> I used to revere them and do what they said
> 'Til I learned what they learned on was already dead.
> (quoted in _The Detroit News_ Nov. 17, 1988)

Bogus' medical experiences are farcical and deeply comic.

> Doctor, doesn't my urine tell
> If I shall perish or get well?
> (quoted in Bakhtin 180)

A physician is "specifically linked with elimination, especially with urine, which played an important part in ancient medicine" (179). Bogus' "narrow, winding" urinary tract becomes apparent-- and farcical-- at yet another traditional moment of initiation: his first sexual experience.

> "Clap," his father said, and like most things his father said, it sounded like a command. And Fred thought, Clap? Oh no, please be careful. No one should clap anywhere near it now. God, don't anyone clap, please ... (147)

Later Bogus tells Dr. Vigneron that his ailment is "nonspecific"; like his own bumbling history, sometimes it responds to treatment, sometimes not. He is too afraid to have surgery, to widen his horizons or his urinary tract (I can imagine Irving chortling over reviewers writing sentences like that one). He is unwilling to believe the good doctor and Tulpen, who says, "If something can be fixed, then fix it" (15). Bogus vacillates, proclaiming, "I want to change" (16), and finding that he's unable to do more than drift. He wants to raise questions and connect things up (264) and starts off by deciding to keep a diary

> but not because Irving has designed the novel so as to suggest some clear insight, some "statement" to which Trumper's life will "add up". (Harter and Thompson 50)

Bogus' desire to achieve a satisfying, once-and-for all transformation is denied at novel's end. He is still confused, although more peaceful. He accepts the idea that things don't necessarily "add up" (that seeing his first wife will be a mixed pain and pleasure, for example). The old distrustful and untrustworthy Bogus has been, to a point, transformed: the operation seems to be a "liminal" experience. The time before the operation is a revelation to Bogus: " ... here was a forced association: people who have problems peeing. Call us Vigneronists! We could meet once a week, have contests and exhibitions-- a kind of track and field meet of urinary events" (165). This is one of the first times that Bogus has tried to comfort someone besides himself,[35] as if his vision has expanded, or if borders have somehow been pushed back (Bergson's idea of comedy being "a person at the mercy of his body" ties in well here).

Irving's great comic sense allows him to use this rather farcical difficulty both as a "real" (penile) block and to symbolize Bogus' knotted up life. Like Garp, he also wants the impossible: to protect his child from every possible harm:

> ... I desired to bring him up in some sort of simulated natural habitat-- some kind of pasture or corral-- .... Bring him up in a sort of dome! Create his friends, invent a satisfying job, induce limited problems, simulate hardships (to a degree), fake a few careful threats, have him win in the end-- nothing too unreasonable. (157)

(Scientists recently had to drill holes in the roof of Biosphere II. The reason? It was getting stuffy.)

In the comic principle of inversion, the father-son roles are reversed when Colm and Bogus see a duck crash, dead, at the zoo. Bogus, as usual, lies to shield his son from anything disturbing ("He was just showing off"), while at home, Colm looks at his father "with worldly sympathy, obviously feeling sad to be stunning his father with such a hard truth," saying "Some ducks just die .... Animals and birds and people. They just get old and die" (160-61). Like some of the characters in Memento Mori, Bogus has no remembrance of his own death, so his life, while not exactly insipid, is lived without real joy until he recognizes his own "stupid fear," as Bakhtin would say.

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[35] As mentioned, feminist comedy is very often communal in approach. Hotel New Hampshire is a good example; the hotel is less a commercial enterprise than an ever-changing three-ring circus. Pym's small villages and apartment buildings also have a communal flavor.

> [Woolf's] comedy ultimately undermines all definitions of a group as a centered, unified identity and rewrites the concept of community as a fragmented, questioning, contradictory, but fully collective voice (Cuddy-Keane 280).

Communities, as shown in Chapter 2, often replace families, as in the May of Teck Club or the geriatric ward.

> "All I want to do in a film is describe something worthwhile," Ralph said. "I hate conclusions."
> "I don't believe in endings," Trumper said. (89)

Throughout his life, Bogus tries to link things up through writing (as Joan Delacourt eventually does)-- he tries to keep a diary and in his nightmarish time at an Austrian pension he keeps finding more typed pages in the typewriter he bought on arriving. Writing can posit another reality for Trumper; it is his way of sorting things out. Not necessarily to impose order on them, but to see them in more than one dimension. "The world is too strong" (32) unless there is some way of "fighting the good fight" against it and surviving. He makes "from the dreck of daily lives ... the improbable seem likely" (quoted in Miller 63). In fact, Pym's women, and Spark's too, often see beauty, improbability, oddity, in daily lives: Belinda's pure happiness while kneading ravioli dough, Sandy's feeling that pineapple cubes had the "authentic taste and appearance of happiness ... different from the happiness of play that one enjoyed unawares" (JB 16).

The Water-Method Man is Irving's only novel to use multiple points of view and textual interruptions extensively: Hotel New Hampshire and The

World According to Garp use more straightforward plots, without the constant turning upside down of chronological time. Like The Edible Woman, The Water-Method Man varies between first and third person. And like The Handmaid's Tale, it includes some addresses to "you"-- ostensibly the narrator's lover, whether Luke, Biggie, or Tulpen-- but in practical terms the reader. It is a commonplace to say that a first/third person split "stands for" a character's alienation from his/her self, and to suggest that such a split is always harmful. But, as Teresa de Lauretis writes, such techniques have the effect of opening up the whole question of representation; the usual meaning is destabilized:

> ... the only way to position oneself outside of that discourse is to displace oneself within it-- to refuse the question as formulated, or to answer deviously (through its words), even to quote (but against the grain). (7)

These authors use some traditional ways of telling a story: "I" telling "you" what happened. But it goes wrong somehow. Bogus' "I" turns into a "he" that is actually Bogus himself

> whether obviously inside or only apparently outside his mind, we recognize that (as is always the case with point of view) vantage point is crucial. This "autobiography" makes use of more than one device to create a sense of its author's consciousness; it provides a refraction of perspective that allows us to feel the tension between fact and feeling, experience and the impression it leaves. (Harter & Thompson 43)

Both The Water-Method Man and Lady Oracle are written as "autobiographies"; though Lady Oracle does not employ third-person as a device, it does include reviews and a great deal of Joan's writing, much of which serves to demonstrate her need, like Bogus', to see people as either heroes or villains. Bogus believes Merrill Overturf is a hero and that Mulcahy is a villain; later on these beliefs, like others, undergo some revision. Joan, similarly, wants to keep The Royal

Porcupine as Heathcliff, not to let him become "gray and multidimensional and complicated like everyone else" (271). Both carry idealized, or romanticized, images of other people with them-- another way of saying that they want to see other people as static, as simple and unchanging. But, because of their own tendency to be "escape artists," they slowly begin to realize that the world is "in process," always changing and growing (is this why Lilly Berry's autobiography is called Trying to Grow?).

Destabilizing traditional narrative, as de Lauretis says, is done in several ways, but it's the "devious answer" that best applies to Bogus Trumper and to Joan Delacourt. Both are self-proclaimed liars:

> Bogus .... was the invention of my oldest and dearest friend, Couth, who coined the name when he caught me lying. (16)

A bit later he says, "I learned to say only what's essential (though people who've known me would tend to say that I am lying even now)" (18). Joan tells us, "it wasn't more honesty that would have saved me ... it was more dishonesty. In my experience, honesty and expressing your feelings could lead to only one thing. Disaster" (33). Both are unapologetic and extravagant liars. As Miller says of Trumper, both learn "the wisdom of distrusting 'facts' and the necessity to look beyond them" (62). Trumper begins the story by enumerating facts: the narrow, winding road of his urinary tract, the little in common he and Tulpen have, and the fact that "I believe in Rituals!" (17). Offred lists such facts, too: that she is five feet seven, that her hair is brown, that she is thirty-three years old, that "I have one more chance" (HT 135). But these "facts" are not enough to give a sense of all the multiple layers of her self and her story. (As Paul Smith says, the subject is not self-contained, but determined by "outside," though it's almost always presented as being cohesive [Preface]). Bogus is far from cohesive; one reviewer calls him "coming apart at the seams"; nor is Joan, who feels she should "pull herself together," or Offred, who must compose herself. But they become more open (is "pervious" the opposite of "impervious"? If a bomb is inert, can its opposite be "ert"?), more porous to the idea that they, and their narratives, need not be consistent or linear, but a gathering of alternatives. Irigarary tackles the either/or, oppositional dictates of rhetoric

> (Where I am is not a prison but a privilege, as Aunt Lydia said, who was in love with either/or. [HT 8])

as Smith says, as a means of refusal: refusing to be reduced to the proffered description. Tulpen, for one, is a great refuser of language's limits. When Trumper writes that he wants to see her:

> She sent a postcard of the Bronx Zoo which said: "Words, words, words, words ..." as many times as it took to nearly fill the postcard. (349-50, orig. ellipsis)

So if words are not enough to portray his many-layered self, what's left? Well, as I said earlier, there's the option of playing with language, either through "metaphor-into-narrative," puns, or Offred's technique of word-play. But Offred is the most successful, I think, in communicating this divided self, through her attempts to be "honest": she gives us several descriptions of one event. Like Trumper, she learns to mistrust "facts."

> The resultant comedy demystifies women's existence in the late twentieth century; the mutability of self points up the arbitrary nature of the restrictions that the women's movement has fought so vigorously during these years. (Walker in Barreca 205)

Walker terms Offred's narrative "ironic autobiography," but it's important to note that autobiography is "falsely synonymous with her identity" (Lacombe 4). Offred seems to question herself, and her own motivations, throughout the text; this is suggested in the "palimpsestic" beginning that Lacombe has analyzed, but her mistrust and suspicion of facts become apparent throughout the novel. Like Edna Pontellier, she must cultivate "that outward existence which conforms, the inward life which questions" (Chopin 26). The questioning takes the form of "inwardly questioning" the status quo-- Gilead as it is at the time of writing-- and pre-Gilead "normalcy." Her questioning takes the form of a merciless self-interrogation.

> This is a reconstruction. All of it is a reconstruction .... as I lie flat on my single bed rehearsing what I should or shouldn't have said, what I should or shouldn't have done, how I should have played it. (126)

She repeatedly tells us that what we are getting is a re-vision, at a remove; as "proof" she gives us a demonstration of the possibilities, things she believes in, simultaneously: that Luke has been shot and lies face down in a thicket; that he is in prison, his head shaved; that he was not caught at the border and that he will send a message: "This contradictory way of believing seems to me, right now, the only way I can believe anything" (100). It is this spectrum of beliefs-- that reflect on her selves-- that keep her alive. And it is her knowledge of and belief in ambiguity that allow her to tell us the story at all.

> Language doesn't merely describe identity, but actually produces moral and perhaps even physical identity .... (Bersani in Gilbert and Gubar's Madwoman 11)

> I wait. I compose myself. My self is a thing I must now compose, as one composes a speech. (HT 62)

Offred denies her own authority as author. Although unlike Bogus and Joan she is not a self-confessed liar, she keeps alerting us to the artificiality of her story, even to the point of apologizing for its lack of shape, its prevalence of pain. Her thoughts on the many layers of meaning in a word also drive home her point: that the language she presents, like the self she must present, is only a "reconstruction" that can never capture all the "too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that ..." (126).[36] To entertain herself, much as Sandy does by "making patterns with facts," she figuratively plays with words:

> I sit in the chair and think about the word chair. It can also mean the leader of a meeting. It can also mean a mode of execution. It is the first syllable in charity. It is the French word for flesh. None of these facts has any connection with the others.
> These are the kinds of litanies I use, to compose myself (104).
>
> Labor Day. They still have that, although it never used to have anything to do with mothers.
>
> Job. It's a funny word. It's a job for a man. Do a jobbie, they'd say to children, when they were being toilet-trained .... The Book of Job. (162)

Offred, like a good Yankee, must make do with what she has ("Waste not want not"); she can only use the skimpy language at her disposal, subverting its message (Lacombe 7). This is a way for her of remembering one of her past selves, one who worked in a library putting books on disks. In one way Offred's subtext is the story of every feminist writer.

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[36] Bakhtin writes that language is "overpopulated with the intentions of others." This relates to the question of the subject, since recent theories of the subject acknowledge that people construct themselves as subjects through language; as subjects governed by dominant ideology, we are subject to its constraints (for women, an emphasis on thinness, beauty, being "together"). Alice Munro brilliantly depicts the ways in which girls and women construct their identities:

> ... none of [the female scholarship students] had latched on to the sort of life Rose wanted for herself. She wanted to perform in public. She thought she wanted to be an actress but had never tried to act.... She would really have liked to play the harp, but she had no ear for music. She wanted to be known and envied, slim and clever. (Who Do You Think You Are? 7)

Belsey emphasizes that it is in the best interests of society to suppress contradiction, whether in a character or in a text.

> Rose wondered what the words were like, when she held them in her mind. Did they carry their usual meaning, or any meaning at all? Were they like words in dreams or in the minds of young children, each one marvelous and distinct and alive as a new animal? This one limp and clear, like a jellyfish, that one hard and mean and secretive, like a horned snail. They could be austere and comical as top hats, or smooth and lively and flattering as ribbons. A parade of private visitors, not over yet. (Munro, Who Do You Think You Are? 188)

The elderly schoolteacher in this story has split words from their meaning. Her only entertainment in the old folks' home is spelling whatever words she's given, prompting Rose to wonder what meaning she has connected to "forest," "celebrate," "whether," and "weather." The old woman, like Offred, is confined to a horrifyingly narrow space, but the words-- for her without their "signifieds"-- are her only visitors, decorations, beauties.

> ... she was sitting waiting; waiting, in the middle of her sightless eventless day, till up from somewhere popped another word. She would encompass it, bend all her energy to master it. (Munro 187-8)

Offred is barred from being creative in any other way, so she transforms words and phrases into something that nearly lives and breathes. Another method of subversion is to turn language literally into a game: Scrabble. Offred's "parade of private visitors" is voluptuous, signifying brief freedom, indecency, danger. As a Handmaid, she has been forbidden to read or write, but, in the clandestine sessions with the Commander, she does both. After the first Scrabble session Offred bursts into uncontrollable laughter, "mirth rhymes with birth" (138), and breathes as if in labor. Says Lacombe: "[Offred's laughter] gives birth to the self in an act of 'jouissance'[37] that

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effectively bypasses the 'power politics' of a father's tutelage. Absurd and arbitrary, the Scrabble game reinstates the subject into the symbolic order of language ... (4). Lacombe then traces how Offred demonstrates her own ambiguous relationship with the word and with her hypothetical readers, suggesting that Gilead's language is "the phallocentric word made flesh" (13). Gilead is, in a sense, another example of "metaphor-into-narrative," since Offred recognizes the literalness of its laws: " 'Give me children else I die.' There's more than one meaning to it" (57). Other Biblical edicts, such as "Go forth and multiply" and Scriptural precedent for Wives hitting Handmaids, are also enforced. But since the written law is unavailable to Handmaids, other sayings that have the force of legality are changed: "From each according to her ability, to each according to his needs" is said to be from the Bible, St. Paul to be exact; the Beatitudes include "Blessed are the silent." The Father has the privilege of changing the letter of the law. Offred's seizing of the pen from the Commander sets up other possibilities for existence, "in the future or in Heaven or in prison or underground, some other place .... I believe you into being. Because I'm telling you this story, I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are" (251).

She must keep going with her mutilated, sad, and limping story in order to exist to herself. She wants knowledge ("what is going on" [176]) both intellectual and emotional/sexual. Offred grasps the link between writing, reading and sex as highly personal, illicit acts: "I

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37. The "untranslatable" jouissance ties in well here, since it has connotations of diffuse pleasure linked to the body; laughter, in itself, is also an intense bodily experience, like orgasm or childbirth.

read quickly, voraciously ... trying to get as much into my head as possible .... if it were sex it would be quick furtive stand-up in an alley somewhere" (72-3). Gilbert and Gubar see writing itself as an act of aggression-- I would expand that to include her storytelling as a transgression against "The Law of the Father."

How then is this transgression, this transformation possible-- if Offred is totally subject to the "positively daddyish" "Law-of-the-Father"? Paul Smith puts forth a way out of this strai(gh)tjacket-- "what goes on in people's heads." Offred's personal history, her own intensely private mythology-- memories and more-- can help her to refuse. For instance, perhaps her "history" (for lack of a better word, maybe what I mean is "unconscious," or what Offred calls "the brain going through its files") as the daughter of a radical feminist, along with other things, makes her more likely to resist than someone like Janine. Who knows all the layers and weaknesses of a human mind? As Offred keeps reminding us, all we get is a "reconstruction."

> Amin Malak, in analyzing The Handmaid's Tale, quotes Foucault: "For [man], she is sex-absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her; she is the incidental, as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-- she is the Other." (quoted 12)
>
> ("Or as an editor put it, suggesting possible titles for this article: "Why Girls Are Different." [Shapiro, "Guns and Dolls," Newsweek May 28, 1990, 62)

The "Historical Notes" further make Offred into an "it." She is objectified by academics of the future who acknowledge her existence, but "deny her specificity, converting her from a necessarily duplicitous narrator into the latest and most evocative example of the eternal feminine" (Lacombe 19).[38] You must be an extremely careful reader to

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refuse this image of Offred: after all, it's given to us by a respectable, respected academic. She is "framed" by his conception of her. In the most extreme work of the texts I've selected, she is almost completely trapped within ideology, saved only by "what happens inside her head."

In my authors' renderings of feminist comedy, the unified self is rebelled against in several ways: by the authors themselves, through a refusal to end in a respectable way or to use the standard plot and "language as usual," and by their characters, writers who often create alternate identities. How successful have these attempts at "shattering the institution" of the autonomous self been? In Althusser's ISAs, the subject is the destination of all ideology. The role of ISAs like the church and the academy is to make the subject integrated into society, and to suppress contradictions in order to preserve the status quo. The idea of a "unified self" is, I think, one of these contradictions.

To assert the possibility of an "unfixed subject," to question authority, new critical practice insists on finding plurality and on figuring out what strategies have been used for smoothing over

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38. " ... and then absolutely no more footnotes!" (Updike 219) Paul Smith, in his chapter on feminism, notes just this problem, pointing out that early on, a prevalent idea was that female experience could be transformed into feminist consciousness. The trouble is that an over-reliance on Woman-- an essential and coherent character-- often results.

> The necessity, in other words, is not just to reinstall the female body into the male economy as a kind of provocative rhetoric, but equally to re-view it in such a way that it cannot be reduced or appropriated by the phallicism of the language in which it has traditionally been thought. (Smith 143)

The "multiplicity of feminisms," of which Robin Morgan speaks, seems to me the best way of working through just this problem. One way to achieve such multiplicity is through irreverence, laughter, comedy, breaking the chains of socialization.

contradiction and paradox. My authors tend to celebrate or acknowledge, instead of suppress, such "seams"-- Irving admitting that Garp is like "a patched up suit" to him. (What does that make this thesis?)

Paul Smith, it seems to me, has the most positive recommendations for the state of being a "subject": it "is best conceived of in something akin to a temporal aspect-- the 'subject' as only a moment in a lived life." He goes on to say that our personal history is an important-- and overlooked-- factor in determining the feasibility of ideologies (37). Another possibility is refusal, as Silverman suggests (i.e. viewing a "classic" film through the "eye" of Marxism or feminism, or, I submit, feminist comedy [(Smith 38]).

The classic, or conservative, comic text reaffirms order and coherence and advocates business as usual. Revolutionary comedy, on the other hand, challenges ideas of textual coherence and the readers' place within a text. The reader is left in a state of flux, or a state of liminality. Silverman calls this "segmentation," or a series of interruptions that impede linear progression. In designing my thesis this way, I've guaranteed interruption (and quite possibly irritation). A reader's eyes cannot follow the usual pattern down the page: do you read the whole top layer before getting to the bottom? Do you ignore the interruptions and gallantly try to impose an orderly reading on a disorderly text? Do you attempt to turn it "right side in" so the seams don't stick out or right its balance so its underwear won't be revealed?

I can only hope that I've been able to raise some questions about the ways in which these authors question, through comedy, the self and the language through which the self is negotiated or expressed. But I thank you for your patience: Alberta winters, utility bills, wandering washing machines, filthy refrigerators, barking dogs, grocery shopping, job-hunting, uncertainties and all.

> To compose a work is to negotiate with these questions: What stories can be told? How can plots be resolved? What is felt to be narratable by both literary and social conventions? Indeed, these are issues very acute to certain feminist critics and women writers, with their senses of the untold story, the other side of a well-known tale, the elements of women's existence that have never been revealed. (Blau DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending* 3)

POSTSCRIPT

> And I suspect I shall find the page proofs (due tomorrow) a chill bath of disillusionment. But I wanted - how violently - how persistently, pressingly, compulsorily I can't say - to write this book: and have a quiet composed feeling: as if I had said my say: take it or leave it: I'm quit of that: free for fresh adventures ....
>
> -Woolf's Writer's Diary April 11, 1938 (275-6)

This "Postscript" is a review of my thesis now that it is (relatively) "finished." Since it has finally encountered readers--committee members, friends, and myself (a different "self" than the one who began writing) -- I'd like to address some of the questions that have been raised by these readers and in my own mind. Every thesis (and anti-thesis) is written, at least partially, to test an idea, so I will test my ideas about feminist comedy against my continuing experience and against questions raised by my readers. To tackle some of these issues, I've divided the "P.S." into five sections: the first addresses questions about the fictional/ autobiographical nature of the thesis' top half; the second meditates on feminist and autobiographical theory (bottom-half) as informing an understanding of the (top-half) "self"; the third examines strengths and weaknesses of the "writing self"'s early vision of the thesis as a dinner party; and the fourth explains and defends my use of the "authority of experience" model in reading and writing. The last section, in keeping with the circular nature of things, is a final comment on this "laughing, pregnant hag"'s experiences with feminist comedy.

1. Building a fictional autobiography

To see so many thoughts and ideas in cold black and white; to imagine them bound up on a library shelf somewhere, microfilmed, signed and sealed--it's horrifying in one way, to think that my crass jokes and phone calls and childhood games are somehow out of my hands. But to think of the writing and the reading of the thesis as an ongoing process, as something taking place "in the round" makes it a little less frightening.

My own early timidity and fear of jeopardizing my academic "respectability" is also comic. My fumbling attempts to communicate this fear may come across to some readers as self-heroizing, to others as paranoid ("I'm only paranoid because everyone's against me"). As I said in the Introduction, including myself in this thesis is a tricky proposition: I risk appearing to value my individual experience most highly (self-indulgence) or to pose myself as the Eternal Feminine (narcissism). Perhaps this fear is one experienced by most writers of autobiography; with me it went deeper, though, because this was expected to be "footnoted dissertationeses." It was difficult for me to to write (or read) my thesis as autobiographical, or as a novel, or as anything but a thesis. This certainly says something about the climate of expectation and/or the power of institutions.

But a problem in writing autobiographically is that I create a particular *kind* of character: white, middle-class, bourgeois-- and risk making this seem the norm, or the Experience of Woman. This is risky, but, I think, worthwhile if one acknowledges the existence of the problem. Maybe I had Rich's "Dream of a Common Language," or just a dream of common ground in mind-- that we share enough to make communication valuable.

Rita Felski says this better:

> For all its problems, self-examination as an impetus to personal change continues to play a central, if not the only, part within the politics of the women's movement. It thus seems necessary to reaffirm the point that whether subjectivity is perceived as radical politics or self-indulgent narcissism is at least partly dependent upon the standpoint from which it is being judged and the context in which it occurs. (108)

So some readers judged the loose style of the top layer as radical politics, or as comedy, while others tended to see it as a glorification of myself as a character, or the presentation of myself as "typical." In the next few pages, I'll try to explore some of the problems this raises, and some of the potentialities inherent in my chosen style.

How did I create this character who is both me and not-me? Two things seemed important to tell readers clearly: my preoccupation with the physical and the domestic is partially, yes, a "political" stance, or a comic stance of reversal. But also being concerned with "comma-counting," or small details, in a domestic rather than an academic sense is sometimes overpowering. Everyday concerns are strong enough to keep me from straightforwardness sometimes. The laundry, the gas bill, candy bars, refrigerators, baby kicks, phone calls and job rejections were/are more pressing than academic life (blasphemy!). Certainly these things interrupt and distract far more; they're more jagged and shrill. Details crowd in-- how to teach avoidance of comma splices, how to do Lamaze exercises, how long to cook the chicken quarters. These things construct me as much as I construct them.

And perhaps my style, my concerns, have been "too close" to domestic angst ("Diary of a Mad Grad Student") or the Erma Bombeck distress at seeming and feeling powerless. But I wanted to show that laughing is one of the first steps toward power and away from despair: to laugh as a feminist shows a recognition that a situation must be changed, and can be changed. As I said in the Introduction, it's not possible for me to show a cause-and-effect relationship between feminist comedy and social and/or political change, but I did want to open up the question. One way of doing this was to write a sort of "ironic autobiography," even as I discussed the four authors' texts.

As Sidonie Smith writes in A Poetics of Women's Autobiography, women's autobiography has been described as "sometimes interesting" or "skillfully written," but "more often than not flawed, insignificant, idiosyncratic, irrelevant, or just plain tedious" (16). When I read this, my heart sank; I'd tried to include illuminating or funny incidents that seemed representative of some women's experience. I worried that these might seem "banal." My fears were realized when one reader remarked that she had to balance her checkbook, buy dog food, and do her laundry too; why was it revolutionary that I'd included references to myself doing this?

> ("Feminine" narratives "may be witty, skillful, polished, and yet they remain narrow in scope and limited in impact, generally neither profound nor significant." [S. Smith 11])

(Or that playground, Sunday school voice: "WHAT MAKES YOU SO SPECIAL?")

First of all-- and this will sound amazingly naive-- I didn't set out to write the top layer as an autobiography. Even while I was doing this, I didn't name it as such. When one reader referred to the top layer as a novel, and another as fictional autobiography, I was taken aback. I'd intended inclusion of "the personal" as a comic strategy, since it reversed the traditional thesis stance of objectivity. But in reading it over, I see how it can be read as a novel: it has an almost picaresque structure (including a journey or process by a rogue narrator on the fringes of her society). Like Moll Flanders, I tried to remain "morally pure in [my] whoring" (Watt in Elliott 24)-- in my case, to get a degree for mocking the institution which granted it, or to "join the professions and yet be uncontaminated by them" (3G 96).

The label of fictional autobiography applies too-- yes, the thesis has been "true" in many ways, not all of them factual. Sidonie Smith writes of the process of autobiography, of the process of assigning meaning to a series of experiences after the fact (45). "I" is a fictive persona, a masquerade-- because a writer usually identifies with myths, metaphors, and/or idealized literary figures (46) (Moll Flanders? Bogus Trumper? Mildred Lathbury?). So I, as a fictive persona, write for an imaginary reader; not the "sympathetic female confidante" that Rita Felski (99) envisions the confessional writer employing, and maybe not (anymore) the fatherly professor with leather elbow patches and cloud of pipe smoke, but someone slightly different (see my comments on this in the Introduction). I certainly didn't anticipate an all-female thesis committee, who scrupulously covered (or uncovered) everything from theory to announcements about wearing new underwear to the defense.

The role of mediation is important here too:

> A feminist textual theory cannot simply move from text to world; it must be able to account for the levels of mediation between literary and social domains, in particular the diverse and often contradictory ideological and cultural forces which shape the processes of literary production and reception. (Felski 8, orig. emph.)

Ideological forces (which I've discussed as Althusser's ISAs) form a product like a thesis-- particularly an autobiographical thesis, and the choices I've made throughout the writing and reading of it.

Felski writes of women's autobiography as typically personal, domestic, repetitive, interrupted. (But I didn't write this way knowing that this was what it was-- just that I felt more comfortable, less like a liar, if I wrote in "the language of the marketplace.") Further, she describes feminist autobiography (if that's what the top half indeed is) as less concerned with essential humanity than with delineating "specific problems and experiences which bind women together" (94)-- a concern with describing a sort of collective or communal identity. This emphasis on collective identity seems very Rabelaisian and also very feminist to me (as Woolf's rather collective Between the Acts is also). By dividing the topic of feminist comedy into three parts, I hoped to find and explore themes (religion, school, family, self) that resonate (perhaps to varying degrees) to each reader, as well as to myself. To identify with common oppressions under the law-- even if these are not necessarily common experiences-- is communal and feminist.

The desire to write the top layer in the vernacular was related to the unstated (then, at least) feeling that to be more honest, the thesis had to reflect some of my daily life: concerns with the fragmented, existence of the graduate student sessional (teach 11-12:30, 1-2:30, mark till 5, grad seminar at night and who will feed me?), the ever-changing body of someone who's gone from fat to thin to pregnant, the life of someone who is overwhelmed with the feeling that sexism is inescapable, from the "Name of the Father" given babies before birth (even if that's rejected, it's still the expectation, and the expectation will have more influence than the rejection, as I'm/we're finding out. For instance, I angrily scribbled out "maiden name" on the hospital preadmission form, and substituted "birth name." This resulted in a phone call from the registration office: "I don't understand. What IS your name?" A nurse was reluctant for me to be admitted under my own name, saying that "We wouldn't want your baby to get mixed up with someone else's.") Earlier I likened sexism to some sort of poison that lingers in the fatty tissues, altering one's chemistry inexorably. Maybe naming and analyzing this poison is a step toward prescribing an antidote.

> I would like to believe this is a story I'm telling. I need to believe it .... I must believe it ....
> If it's a story I'm telling, then I have control over the ending. Then there will be an ending, to the story, and real life will come after it. I can pick up where I left off.
> It isn't a story I'm telling.
> It's also a story I'm telling, in my head, as I go along. (HT 37)

Maybe another method would have been more "accurate" for me: Drabble alternating third- and first- person narratives in The Waterfall: "And yet I haven't lied. I've merely omitted: merely, professionally, edited" (47). Nancy Walker calls this "ironic autobiography," where

> [t]he consciousness of the social "self" as somehow fictive, created in large part by cultural rules and expectations, leads the author to use an ironic method in which the central character or narrator is presented as a creation of her own imagination. The voice of the ironic self comments with exasperation or amusement on the thoughts and actions of her "created" self, while viewing her sympathetically, as one hopelessly enmeshed in the absurdities of women's lives. The resultant comedy demystifies women's experience in the late twentieth century; the mutability of self points up the arbitrary nature of the restrictions that the women's movement has fought so vigorously during these years. (205)

Walker further observes that for women, autobiographical writing has been problematic because the concept of selfhood has been problematic, pointing to the "dual consciousness" in early autobiography. She argues that in the contemporary novel of irony, a split between "the intellectual and the familial roles" (209) is often apparent. I think that to read this thesis in such a way-- the familial "on top" and the intellectual "on the bottom"-- might be a useful approach. In the next section I want to suggest some ways in which the two layers might be coalesced or mediated.

2. Theory and the self/subject

> Given the very nature of language, embedded in the text lie alternatives or deferred identities that constantly subvert any notions of truthfulness. (S. Smith 5)

Theory allows a clearer, but not complete, understanding of "self." Sidonie Smith's idea, that a kind of sub-identity (or indeed, plural sub-identities) of the text and author emerges as one considers the text is a useful way to approach the top layer of this thesis on "the morning after," so to speak. This recognition-- that different aspects of a character can emerge if this text is viewed as autobiographical-- may well have changed some of my approaches, especially early on in the writing process, where I harped on honesty and truthfulness as if they might be monolithic, unproblematic, or easy enough to uncover. Though I recognized the seduction of "completeness," and its impossibility, as well as the necessity of compromise, I still hoped for something approaching honesty. Or, as Sidonie Smith says about sixteenth and seventeenth century autobiography, some such writing arose from the hope that one's image can be fixed so it won't disappear (21). (As an aside, I find it nicely ironic that my autobiographical top-half writing has its roots in Christian self-examination or the confessional-- something else I might have profitably exploited in my chapter on religion.)

Smith mentions that the idea of selfhood in the West was never coupled with a consideration of the ways in which the discourses of the church, state, economics and politics "described and prescribed women's selfhood" (19). Though she speaks here primarily of the Middle Ages, I believe that too little consideration is given these ISAs still-- particularly as they influence the writing of women's autobiography: " ...it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technology of forces and bodies" (Foucault 217). Judy Little's ideas on "primary socialization" were really the first to make me think about the ways in which the self or subject internalizes ideology. I'd clumsily described as "what happens to us before we know what's happening"-- the self-fulfilling prophecies of pink blankets in the nursery and "boys don't cry." A knowledge of Althusser's ISAs, if consciously and scrupulously applied to my top layer, could have helped me to articulate some of the ideas I fumblingly tried to communicate: about names, money, stay-at-home fathers and dishpan hands.

Smith's conclusion-- that autobiographies by women can testify to the collapse of the myth of the unified self (59)-- might have allowed me an easier alliance between the top and bottom layers, and helped assuage the fretting over its fragmentary, collage-like nature. She writes, too, that writers of women's autobiography can refuse to obey the prohibitions of the father's culture, and that her five case studies exemplify ways in which this is done. Perhaps if I'd been more aware of other "nay-saying" women writers of autobiography, my initial timidity would have been less (but my exhilaration at what I was doing something less too?). There was, as I see it, a great deal of self-consciousness about my positioning as a graduate student, teacher, American living in Canada, married woman, writer, mother-to-be and other contradictory positions-- but many of these positions were obviously, almost inherently, contradictory (writing an anti-establishment thesis in hopes of being accepted by the establishment, being aware of sexism and yet feeling powerless, and so on). Perhaps theories of feminist autobiographies might have led me to be more self-conscious about situating myself within various competing discourses throughout the thesis.

Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior examines the relationship between the individual's self and the community's stories of selfhood. (S. Smith 150). To try, as Kingston does, to examine the influence and limitations of "scripts that write us" might have allowed me to reveal things about myself by telling stories about others. I did do this to a small extent, with anecdotes and jokes that unavoidably bespoke my values, but didn't realize the influence of stories told to me and by me on a construction of the self (" ... the powerful enticement of succumbing to the implications of her mother's narratives and her culture's maxims, the confusing attractiveness of not having to find a public voice, of not struggling with shame" [S. Smith 169]). This is something Margaret Laurence does in The Diviners: Morag Gunn's "Memorybank Movies" and "Christie's Tales," though not "about" Morag, nonetheless reveal a great deal about her. ("I am remembering myself composing this interpretation ...." [16]; "I don't recall when I invented that one .... I must've made it up much later on, long long after something terrible had happened" [17]-- stories about her long-dead parents and their lives before her birth.)

To negotiate with the stories told to one: to examine them for their influence-- are we then "women victimized by fiction" (Brothers 61)? It would be fun, and instructive, to try to assess the impact of stories on women-- from near-infancy onward (even strictly speaking of storybooks, of Cinderella and Snow White; as we decorate the nursery what "icons" are sold? Winnie the Pooh, Mickey Mouse and Pluto, Charlie Brown). What stories are we told in adolescence?-- good girls don't, why buy a cow if you can get the milk free, it was "meant to be." But what about the family legends many are told, as Kingston is? Is it possible for women to appropriate them and claim them as their own, but rehabilitated, as she does with her mother's story and her aunt's?

To take a slightly different angle, what would happen if we were able to find a place to stand on and clearly see how the self internalizes the sequence, the sentence (see Chapter 3) of ideology? Foucault, in Discipline and Punish, examines some of the ways societal disorder has been prevented by "panopticism": employment of a highly regulated and structured system, close observation of all actions, and permanent registration (195-6)-- much like my mocking description of grade-school threats for misbehavior: "This goes on your PERMANENT record." A key to this system's success is the procedure of individualization-- collectivity is abolished, and exclusion in the nineteenth century was accomplished through the asylum, jail, reformatory, school, and hospital (like the schoolyard or corporate office practice of ostracizing someone in disgrace). With collective activity impossible, any significant change is then also impossible; disorderliness is choked off. Another key is that power be invisible and unverifiable (201); as in the "panoptical" prisons with their open, theatre-like individual cells and watchtowers, power is acquired through monitoring that need not be constant or consistent-- just evident enough to intimidate. And a possibly unanswerable question: how does autobiography function in a system that enforces through individualization? Does "writing the 'self'" further serve the cause of panopticism? Or, if it stresses our common oppression, can autobiography deny (or at least begin to deny) such a system?

In The Handmaid's Tale, Offred thinks about the Guardians: " ... likely they don't think in terms of clothing discarded on the lawn. If they think a kiss, they must then think immediately of the floodlights going on, the rifle shots" (22). Here, panopticism acts "even before the offences, mistakes or crimes have been committed" (Foucault 208). When Ofglen asks her whether she thinks God listens to the Soul Scrolls machines, Offred's first reaction was "I could scream. I could run away. I could turn from her silently, to show her I won't tolerate this kind of talk in my presence. Subversion, sedition, blasphemy, heresy, all rolled into one" (157-8). Or, as Foucault writes, "Inspection functions ceaselessly. The gaze is alert everywhere ..." (195), even on oneself. Though surveillance is discontinuous, it is unverifiable; this is where the power lies (like those psychology experiments that show if a chicken is rewarded with corn at random intervals for pecking on a key, it will peck itself to death eventually even if the corn will never reappear; if it's rewarded or punished consistently, it will give up. The same is true with this kind of "unverifiable" power.) (And with my pecking on word processor keys?)

Full appreciation of "the sentence" and its relation to the construction of the self/subject might have allowed me to see more clearly the dangers of glorifying individualism and/or liberalism, something I believe occurred in early chapters. That is, I didn't appreciate the possible pitfalls of celebrating the individual-- that fragmentation could lead to isolation ("divide and conquer"). Possibly this came about because of a cultural phenomenon: the American propensity to exalt the "lone wolf" and to celebrate rugged individualism and not cooperative or collective behavior.

In some ways, Foucault's description of the panopticon has alliances with tragedy as a genre: the isolation of the individual, the terrible consequences of every act, the inevitability of doom, the abuses of power, the hero as "object of information but never a subject in communication" (200) (the latter approximately what it means to speak a soliloquy). Foucault specifically mentions the festival, or carnival, of suspended laws, frenzy, relinquishment of statutory identity, as the reverse of the "political dream" of regulation, hierarchy, assignment to the individual of his/her "true" name, place, body, etc. (198), possibly why carnival is so objectionable to the concept of the "perfect city." Carnival is the polar opposite of the city which functions according to pure theory (199). Panopticism, as Foucault describes it, has chilling effects on various groups or types of people-- not only the mad and the criminal, but "patients, schoolchildren, and workers" (201). These people also internalize ideology's "gaze [that] is alert everywhere."

Foucault's theories could be useful if applied to the disorderly top half of this thesis. Since this layer was intended to be comic and transgressive, the theory of panopticism may have revealed other ways in which subtle coercion of ideology forced me to compromise stylistically. Or, as one examiner asked, why did I choose "familiar," or "comfortable" texts for study? Applying the "internalization of ideology" idea might have explained some of my choices to myself (and others). Most important here might have been the "mildness-production-profit" principle (219) which disciplines-- not through fear or violence, but through neutralizing resistance (as one neutralizes a chemical by rendering it powerless). The banality of absolute power, as Offred observes, lies partly in its familiarity and ordinariness. I was conscious of how certain kinds of power-- questions of the body, money, "writing to please," self-censorship, to name a few-- affected my self-construction in the top layer. But I don't know if I or anyone can be fully aware of all the "subtle coercion" that works on a woman writer; all one can do is to try to keep peeling back layers. Nothing is direct.

> Human consciousness does not come into contact with existence directly but through the medium of the surrounding ideological world .... (Bakhtin's Dialogic Imagination quoted in S. Smith 48)

This mediation through "the surrounding ideological world" makes me wonder about something I was asked: if the top-half character had read the bottom half, what would happen? What might result if "she" (the comic) had a conversation with "him" (the academic) over dinner? She would be angrier and more aggressive, more outspoken against him-- more questioning, less willing to feel intimidated by Theory and Academia. I think that she would be more aware of the possibilities of comic feminism.

If the two characters went out to dinner, who would pay? What would they talk about? What would they eat, and who would leave the tip (or throw a drink on her/his dinner partner, or go and cry in the bathroom)? Who would apologize first? I also think that there were more slippages between the two layers than I'd like to admit: I'd begun with the idea of severely and scrupulously separating the two. But on subsequent rereadings and rewritings, the separation became a bit blurred: "I" used in theoretical writing (OK if you're positing yourself as a Great Man, perhaps Frye, saying "I believe"; less so if you are not a man, not great, and use "I" to discuss underwear or Tampax). So I think that even though I didn't plan it that way (not consciously) the top half character did descend to the world of the footnote, albeit reluctantly. This doesn't have to be construed as negative; maybe it signals some hope for negotiation or mediation, or at least a relatively amicable meal, between the two dinner partners.

3. The Dinner Party

In my Introduction and elsewhere, I'd envisioned the thesis as a dinner party-- a relaxed, festive occasion, or as relaxed as one could be in formal confines between the margins and in the "style of dress" (typeface, manuscript conventions) demanded. I was oddly pleased at emphasizing food and conversation, as Woolf does in the opening pages of *A Room of One's Own*, and by imagining the conversation between my authors as they ate: Atwood being acerbic, Pym chatty and comfortable, Irving determinedly eclectic, and Spark ethereal.

This approach has certain strengths, which I'd like to touch on briefly. For these authors to be "like us," as I said in the Introduction, doesn't mean that I'm drawing a magic circle of insiders who are white, middle-class and Western and excluding everyone else. "Like us" was a bit of shorthand for, perhaps, other outsiders or the marginal (spinsters, like Mildred, the fat like Jane Wright and Joan Delacourt, the "damaged" and voiceless like Ellen James and Roberta Muldoon, for example)-- people not normally within the mainstream of society in one way or another, by virtue of gender, sexual preference, age, body type or beliefs, though they may be "mainstream" in other ways (race, class, nationality, religion). My authors' characters seemed to have a great many fears and concerns in common.

To keep the dinner party analogy going a bit further, it seems important to have guests present who disagree strongly on some very basic issues while having common ground on others. Otherwise it's nearly impossible for valuable interaction to occur (I realize I could likely learn something from an evening with John Birchers, but our disagreements would be so fundamental that there would be virtually nothing to build on for the future.) My identification with these characters is less on the grounds of class, nationality, gender, occupation (what do I "really" know about prewar Scottish girls' schools, spinsters in small English country towns, or Viennese prostitutes?) than with common conflicts: education, religion, abuses of power in these institutions.

Tied to the idea of identification is the appeal of these authors as "ordinary." (But ordinary to whom? My own particular blind spot, I think, has been glossing over this question at times; an "ordinary" concern to me-- scraping together money for a car payment, for instance-- may well seem laughably luxurious, or ridiculously trivial, if the reader is scratching out a subsistence living on minimum wage, or earning a hundred thousand a year.) Nonetheless, inclusion of the unexceptional (a better term than "ordinary") is often a key to comedy. Making mundane lives somehow comically revolutionary is far more of a challenge than making comedy out of thin air. And seeing the comic potential and hope for change in a life like Mildred Lathbury's or Sandy Stranger's is sometimes an art. Since readers can be so used to clicking characters into categories of churchgoing spinster, guilt-stricken nun, 26-year-old confused about relationships, sexually frustrated nurse, it can take some work to see their comedy-- not as "stock" characters, but as potential human beings.

Like every critical stance, the "dinner party" approach has its weaknesses. As host, I may be too forgiving of guests'/authors' lapses in manners (development, style, sloppy thinking, didacticism, for example), and, despite my pose as reveling in vulgarity and earthiness, too willing to overlook the fact that Garp is too fat, Hotel New Hampshire a tad long-winded, The Edible Woman clumsy like a first novel, The Water Method Man occasionally pretentious, Memento Mori too bent on arguing religion and Excellent Women too obsessed with guzzling tea. More serious "political" questions might have emerged if I had structured this more like an academic seminar where each participant rises, speaks in well-modulated and grammatical tones, with a coherent, nicely structured and clearly organized argument (maybe some 3 x 5 cards). After each has spoken, the sharks circle: questions, confrontation, accusation, maybe some backing down or storming out.

But I didn't want to go with the same o' same o'. So what the reader got was like one of those buffets or maybe a smorgasbord. People help themselves, they interrupt each other, talking with their mouths full or spilling things, maybe they drink too much and ideas get a little blurred, thoughts float in and out. Sometimes one will be seized on, worried, analyzed; other times it floats by. Or maybe it is like a family party, where weaknesses, flaws, stridency, are indulged. As when looking at family members, one tends to see similarities and not differences-- or resemblances with variations (my brother is me stretched out to 6'7", extroverted, impulsive, imperious-- not at all a mirror image but themes run across our faces, sometimes eerily similar and sometimes not at all alike). In the same way, the "family dinner" reading of texts and authors may allow for errors of omission; looking too much for common ground so that contradictions, "seams," are smoothed over or left hanging.

(Oh dear, the fear of self-indulgence again.

> ... the demand for a burst of laughter which will dispel anything disturbing that might have been implied or said .... But the confounding of material through metaphor, playful no doubt in the beginning, occurs so frequently that it becomes real mystification or avoidance .... there are problems with this comic procedure. [Todd 45 (on Showalter's "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness")]

Never mind that I scribbled "Oh lighten up!" under this passage.)

If I had read the novels in a more "critical" way, I think the thesis would be less comic (or "zany," though I hate the word) than it is, and more sarcastic, which demands harsher judgments. A more strictly critical approach has the danger of making a reader impose "requirements" on a text-- decrying the author for not including my favorite message (Offred behaves in a disappointing way: I wanted a hero and got a wimp; Selina is reprehensible and yet lives; why can't Mildred be a better comic feminist and refuse Everard Bone?).

Well and good-- but the question of "comfort" still rankles. I've been thinking about the question of whether it's good to deal only with writers who reflect, in some ways, my own positioning? Is it fair to read or discuss only those writers we'd feel comfortable having over to our house for dinner?

At first, these authors were very uncomfortable to me. Partly because of style, partly because of subject matter, I had difficulties.

But after long acquaintance, arguments and scrutiny, they became like old friends. It wasn't easy. Irving's incorporation of Chapter One of The World According to Bensenhaver in Garp seemed cruel and horrible; I confess that in rereading this novel I almost always skip this section because of its graphic violence, brutality and mercilessness. It's too much, which is exactly what Irving intended. Or the incest and pornography scenes in Hotel New Hampshire-- they are not good dinner-party conversation because they're too painful to read. Spark's deadpan treatment of her elderly characters in Memento Mori, of whom I'd grown fond in an exasperated way, also made me acutely uncomfortable: "Lettie Colston ... comminuted fractures of the skull; Godfrey Colston, hypostatic pneumonia; Charmian Colston, uraemia; Jean Taylor myocardial degeneration; Tempest Sidebottome, carcinoma of the cervix .... [191]). Like Garp's "body count" in the Epilogue, this particular "writing beyond the ending" hurt and prodded.

Spark anyway is stylistically difficult-- she is, as Siriol Hugh-Jones observes, "a bizarre and holy fantastic who is good for many a hurried laugh before it freezes in the throat" (23). I think that the comedy of these four authors lies, to a great extent, in their capacity to make readers uncomfortable. Many times this is not outward thrusting and jabbing, as more radical revolutionary comedy does (Wittig and Bersianik, for example) but the ability to start a "landslide in the mind," to make one slightly dizzy, the real purpose of feminist comedy.

4. The Magpie Theory

> I would like to take issue with those theoretical critics mainly influenced by psychoanalysis and deconstruction who, I believe, have put theory before literature and the idea of woman before the experience of women. (Todd 14)

Admitting one's identification with a text, as Bogus Trumper learns, is not only dangerous but laughable. "If [a text] had a jot to do with him," Bogus latches on, weeping or cackling or wincing. Like Bogus, I come from the American literary critical tradition of reading and writing which tends to stress both identification and experience as strong themes. And, like many feminists of my generation, the "authority of experience" as a method of reading texts, and of writing about them, rang true in a way that more formal, theoretical or academic structures never did. I came to debates on different kinds of theory as a novice; that is, though looking back I recognize that I was taught New Criticism, it was never named as such; like an ISA, this way of reading texts was so well blended in that it seemed "natural" and "right." Since my earliest training was in journalism and secondary school teaching, I tended to treat texts-- not as codes to be cracked-- but as tools or perhaps guidebooks. Anthea Zeman writes in Presumptuous Girls:

> These novels are monitoring reports on new freedoms, lost ground, new dangers, new possibilities of emotional tax-evasion, and up-to-date reminders of those bills which still have to be paid. (3)

Or, as Alice Walker remarks,

> Books are by-products of our lives. Deliver me from writers who say the way they live doesn't matter. I'm not sure a bad person can write a good book. If art doesn't make us better, then what on earth is it for? (quoted in Steinem 309)

(And, while I cringe at how unsophisticated, naive and un-academic Walker sounds-- and I sound for quoting her-- it still fits. That texts should be didactic or connected to the author's lifestyle sounds horribly crude and "hick," but it was, in many ways, a basic premise under which I operated while writing.)

This position-- this "American" and seemingly naive approach-- is, as Janet Todd says in Feminist Literary History, written in a more activist spirit than other theories today. My discomfort with more "sophisticated" methods of reading was explained in the Introduction: the lack of an adequate language, the fear that for me to subscribe to the secret language of theory smacked of appropriating the enemy's ammunition by emulation, and that to align myself closely with any one theoretical school (psychoanalytic, deconstructionist, Marxist) was too much like Brodie's deadly team spirit, too much like the French and American feminist theory wars. Like Offred, watching movies in geography class, I didn't like seeing the struggle ("miserable, starving, emaciated, straining themselves to death over some simple thing, the digging of a well, the irrigation of land, problems the civilized nations had long ago solved. I thought someone should just give them the technology and let them get on with it" [HT 112]). Also, I was impatient. Get to the text, I wanted to shout. Get to what's there. (How you discover what's there without theory, articulated or not, is a good question, since positioning oneself as apolitical is political, or positioning yourself as anti-theory is theoretical. Even the New Critics' stance of text-as-entity-- no "outside" information as relevant-- is both theoretical and political. In other words, my refusal to choose one theory over another is in itself a choice.)

I liked the idea of appropriating terms from a number of critical positions: carnival theory, more general comic theory, Marxists like Althusser, French feminists' ideas of jouissance, Woolf's pragmatism in 3G. So, probably, saying that I lacked identification with any one critical tradition is inaccurate; my problem seems to be that I saw merit in too many, and borrowed and appropriated freely ("theory of carnival and carnival of theory"). Or, if not a problem-- most feminists agree with me that much critical language could do with more richness-- being a "thief of language" is bound to ensure a magpie-like clutter.

One strength of this feminist and determinedly anti-academic approach, "crude, naive, and untheorized" (Todd 7) as it might be, is the freedom to include the personal and material. Although this marginality has its dangers, among them self-heroizing, or "exaggerating our difficulties 'in order to develop in one another a sense of heroic solidarity in the face of overwhelming odds'" (Ruthven quoted in Todd 8), it nonetheless allows for more comedy and more play, much as Pym's posing of her writing as "minor" allows her to get away with more nasty humor than a "major" novelist could.

Rejecting the monolith of "Theory" was/is also part of many feminists' discomfort with the academy as institution, and with the anxiety that production of theory under the auspices of the academy is collusion. At the very least, it results in compromise, a watering-down, of pragmatic ideas. Further, a complete alignment with the academy certainly limits accessibility to a more general, less specialized audience. This is the simultaneous strength and weakness of "popular" feminist criticism: "because it formed part of a wider, probably class-based movement" with "limited social and academic aims" (Todd 87).

To see feminist criticism as part of the feminist movement to me is essential. The strength of this stance

> has been its political implications, its refusal to separate the project of feminist criticism from the project of feminism, however defined, its willingness, in its hope for progress, to seem unimaginative and boring from a deconstructionist and psychoanalytical viewpoint. (Todd 135)

What I'm here calling the "American" approach, but what might be better called "cultural materialist" or what Todd calls "socio-historical" (4) does seem hayseed-ish or simplistic when viewed alongside other approaches.

> [French theorists] were on the whole uninterested in such mundane and compromising matters as the canon of literature, in limited political aims, or in middle-class academics trying to achieve more classes and find more jobs; the American type of reformist feminism was labelled in post-feminist fashion as dogmatic and political. (Todd 54)

To those of us who do have to struggle with "dogmatic and political" concerns like making feminist studies available to students or with finding jobs-- yes, these questions are mundane (I was going to say "basic," but then there's the chicken-and-egg argument with patriarchal language; which came first?). So this position of mine-- that the feminist cause could be clearly argued through laughter-- was a practical one as much as it was political. Economic and social reform to me go hand in hand with the need to "transform the subject," or to transform language itself. Todd summarizes Kristeva's position by saying "... any transformation must occur in language. Without this, any apparent transformation in the socio-political realm was absurd" (61). "Absurd" would not be my label, but I do believe that transformations of various kinds are intimately connected. One method of negotiating the tension between the two camps-- psychoanalytical and socio-historical critics-- as I suggested in my Introduction, is to examine ideology, which seems their most common ground (see my comments on Althusser, for example). Further, Peter Burger writes that "works of art are not received as single entities, but within institutional frameworks and conditions that largely determine the function of the works" (quoted in Felski 10). Since feminist comedy's primary targets are ideological (the academy, the church, the self), feminist laughter could be a good method for instilling a climate of political change.

Another strength of the experience-based approach is the strongly articulated position that value-free criticism does not exist; that because of my upbringing, education, socio-economic status, etc., my "angle of refraction" will necessarily differ from someone else's ("her duty is to present an account of her own life that will enable her readers to become aware of the position from which she speaks" [Moi 43]). Again, this strength can become a flaw, as Moi suggests-- narcissistic, distracting, ultimately and inevitably incomplete. But (obviously) I believe that erring on the side of "exhibitionism" is preferable to falling back on the old lie of objectivity. My hope for someone to write "the first Tampax in world literature" is not so much the impossible hope that someday the world will be represented "correctly," but that more of women's experiences (yes, Toril, "toe-nail clipping and the disposal of sanitary towels" [45]) be made accessible.

> The social invisibility of women's experience is not 'a failure of human communication.' It is a socially arranged bias persisted in long after the information about women's experience is available (sometimes even publicly insisted upon). (Russ 48)

Moi also faults early American feminist critics for insisting upon role models in fiction (the "governess mentality" [48]). This impulse is strong, as I've said in my discussions of Offred's, Mildred's, Jane's, Helen's capacities for disappointing us-- for not being "good enough" or feminist enough, as fictional characters. I hope I've avoided this tendency; however, to notice and comment upon a character's or author's complicity in patriarchy is also to insist "on the political nature of any critical discourse" (Moi 49, orig. emph.).

Felski represents "experience-based" American criticism as stressing reflectionism; that writers (like myself?) presuppose a distinctly female consciousness. But is the incorporation of my own experience (as joke, as illustration, not as "proof") the same as "deduc[ing] a generalized notion of female experience" (26) from my own life? Writers who strategically employ experience-based models may fall into this trap; however, they don't necessarily, inevitably do so. I would think that the use of "experience" helps criticism more than it hurts; that is, relation of one's experience is noticeable and therefore can be dismissed or applied, as the reader sees fit. (For example you have my permission to discount my trashing of conservative religion as sour grapes for not being chosen as Mary in the Christmas cantata, or at face value, or some mixture of both.)

5. Final comments: back to language (or déjà vu all over again)

> Every age has its own type of words and expressions that are given as a signal to speak freely, to call things by their own names, without any mental restrictions and euphemisms. The use of these colloquialisms created the atmosphere of frankness, inspired certain attitudes, a certain unofficial view of the world. (Bakhtin 188)

Speaking freely in this thesis has been a welcome relief; dropping the frozen face of the scholar has allowed me to communicate my "unofficial view" to the world in a way that I hope is easy, and maybe even fun, to read. I have had fun in writing this; at times, it's been like play to try to connect creativity and flights of fancy up with research and close study. I only wish there were more opportunities to write "familiarly, colloquially" (Woolf qtd. in Blau DuPlessis 262).

The most welcome innovation, though, has been the freedom to use everyday language. (And, to use a useful metaphor, writing in this style has not felt like being dressed "in borrowed robes," but in some loose, flowing garment of bright colors - with commodious pockets.) But back to sex, lies, and academia:

> Martha was a touchstone. She had an unfailing shit detector. She did not pick up every truth, but she picked up every lie. It was, she said, because she had been such a liar all her life. "I lied my way from kindergarten to twelfth grade. Successfully. So now I know the creature when I meet it." (French, The Women's Room 243-4)

I wish I could claim to pick up every lie (certainly a handy talent in academic life), but that's not possible. But to recognize the lies of completeness and detachment is a start.

Rabelais was attacked by those who "granted no special rights to laughter." His books were condemned by the Sorbonne, attacked by monks and Protestants alike (Bakhtin 269)-- ways in which the academy and the church then (and now?) control ribald comic laughter. Are these institutions able to control wild laughter? Laughter, after all, has a great deal in common with anger: to be in a fit of laughter or a fit of rage makes one equally physically helpless. It's impossible to control the energy sometimes. It's also very difficult to resist impulse, the one that tells you to stop being nice (Jane Eyre: "You are deceitful!"). Both anger and laughter are a release from the world of rules and order. They assert themselves. Bakhtin's idea of laughter as liberating us from "the interior censor" fits in well with feminist comedy. Much feminist comedy, including the texts of Atwood, Irving, Pym and Spark that I've examined, revolve around "saying the unsayable" and breaking taboos. To speak in common language is to appeal to Woolf's common reader. Perhaps to write in this informal and wandering (wandering womb? hysteria?)

style will become more acceptable eventually.

> The struggle with cultural hegemony, and the dilemmas of that struggle, are articulated in a voice that does not seek authority of tone or stasis of position but rather seeks to express the struggle in which it is immersed (Blau DuPlessis 268).

(The baby is kicking [that is somehow metaphorical; I like some of the more positive presentations of pregnancy in twentieth century women artists, as a symbol of creativity and fullness-- it seems a rehabilitation somehow of a state most people think of in a grudging or negative or embarrassed way - but still, it is not a glamorous state either; wish there was some balance in between], I feel slightly guilty again because I haven't done any dishes for weeks ["I hate discussions of feminism that end with who's doing the dishes." "But in the end, there are always the damned dishes"]. This bulge of pregnancy makes it hard to reach the keyboard. And the steering wheel. Metaphorical? Is this contrived? But true. Contrived and true. Still worrying about many of the things from the introduction - heating bills, students, "doing the right thing," all that.)

Rabelais made the top layer and bottom layer of his world change places and "intentionally mixed the hierarchical levels" (Bakhtin 403). I've borrowed this technique: by privileging personal and local information over academic and "universal" material, I've tried to mix the levels to see what would happen. In my mind, the insistence on formal and detached academic writing is connected with the insistence on ignoring the world of the body (especially the deliberate avoidance of talk about women's bodies). I remember a story about a pregnant woman who was so afraid of her waters breaking in public that she carried around a jar of pickles with her to throw on the ground at the opportune moment. How much of the day do we spend camouflaging the "material body lower stratum," as Bakhtin, or, as Woolf would say, "something about the body"? As my four authors do, I've tried to invert basic beliefs, "standard" identities, and behaviors.

> It is nonacademic, for in order to make a formal presentation, one must have chosen among theses; this is the rhetorical demand. Cannot, in formal argument, say both yes and no, if yes and no are given equal value under the same conditions. Either one or the other has to prevail. But say, in a family argument? where both, where all, are right? generates another model of discourse. (Blau DuPlessis 263)

> Laughter took her and shook her. She laughed, throwing her head back as if she were possessed by some genial spirit outside herself that made her bend and rise, as a tree ... No idols, no idols, no idols, her laughter seemed to chime as if the tree were hung with innumerable bells, and he laughed too. (Woolf, Years 425)

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